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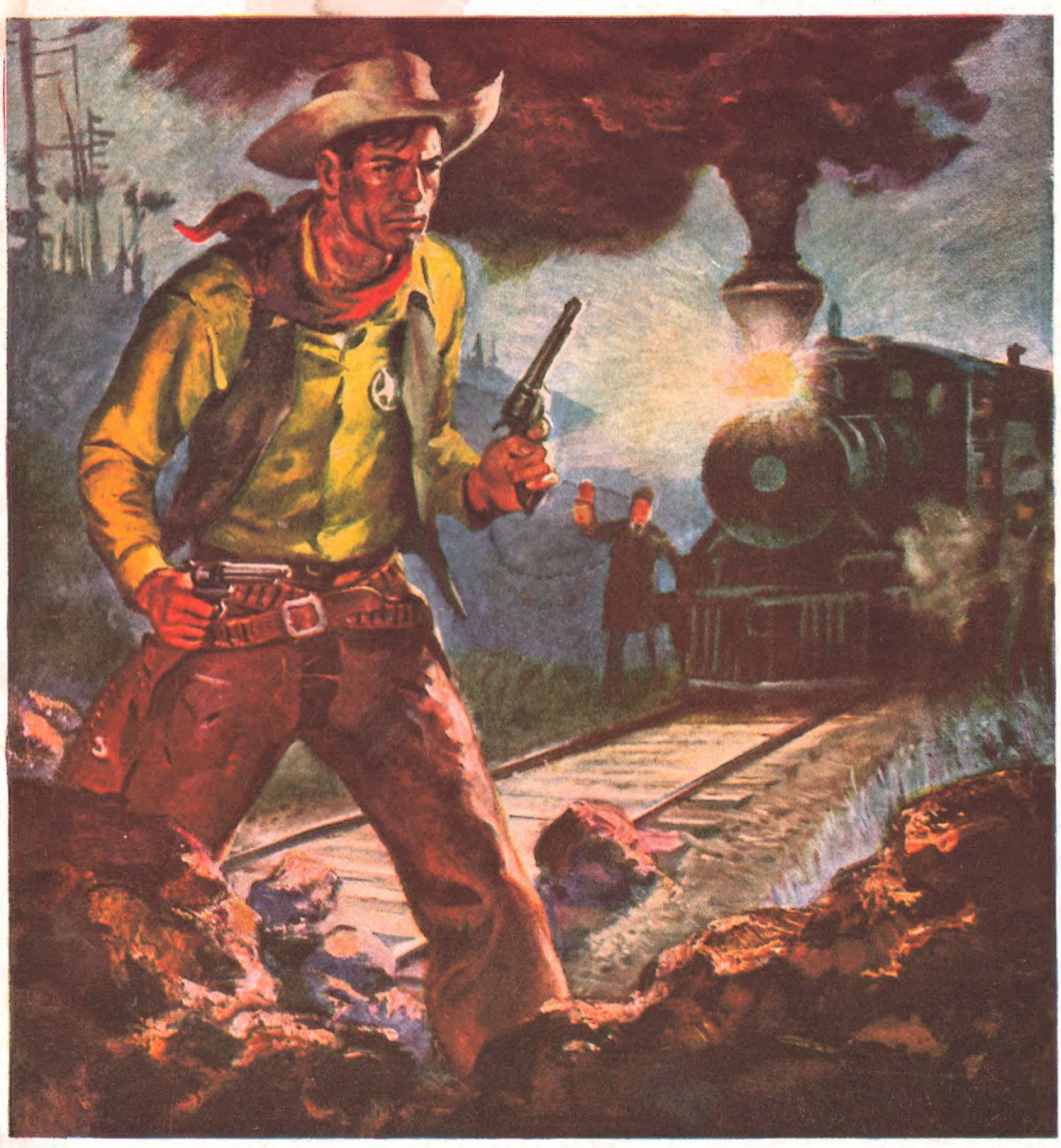

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A HARD-HITTING JIM HATFIELD NOVEL BY **JACKSON COLE**

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TEXAS RANGERS

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

Vol. 55, No. 3 AUGUST, 1954

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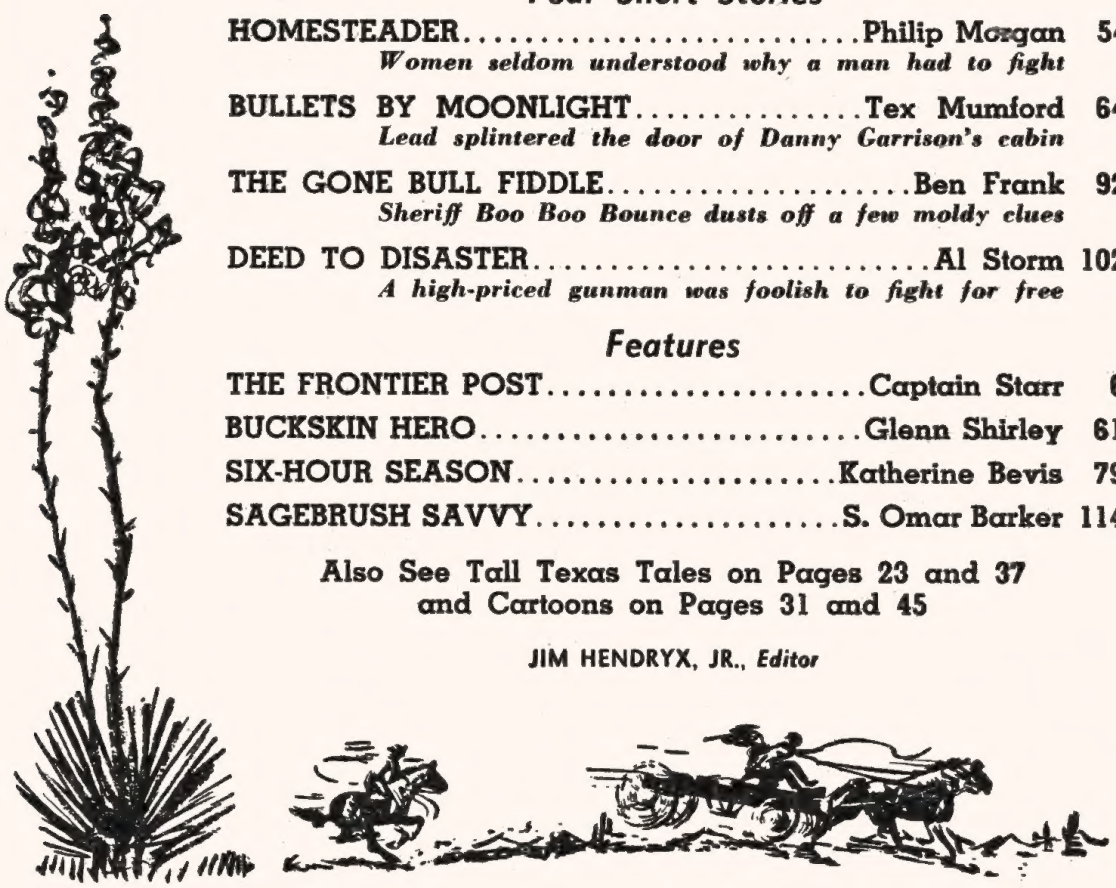
JIM HENDRYX, JR., *Editor*



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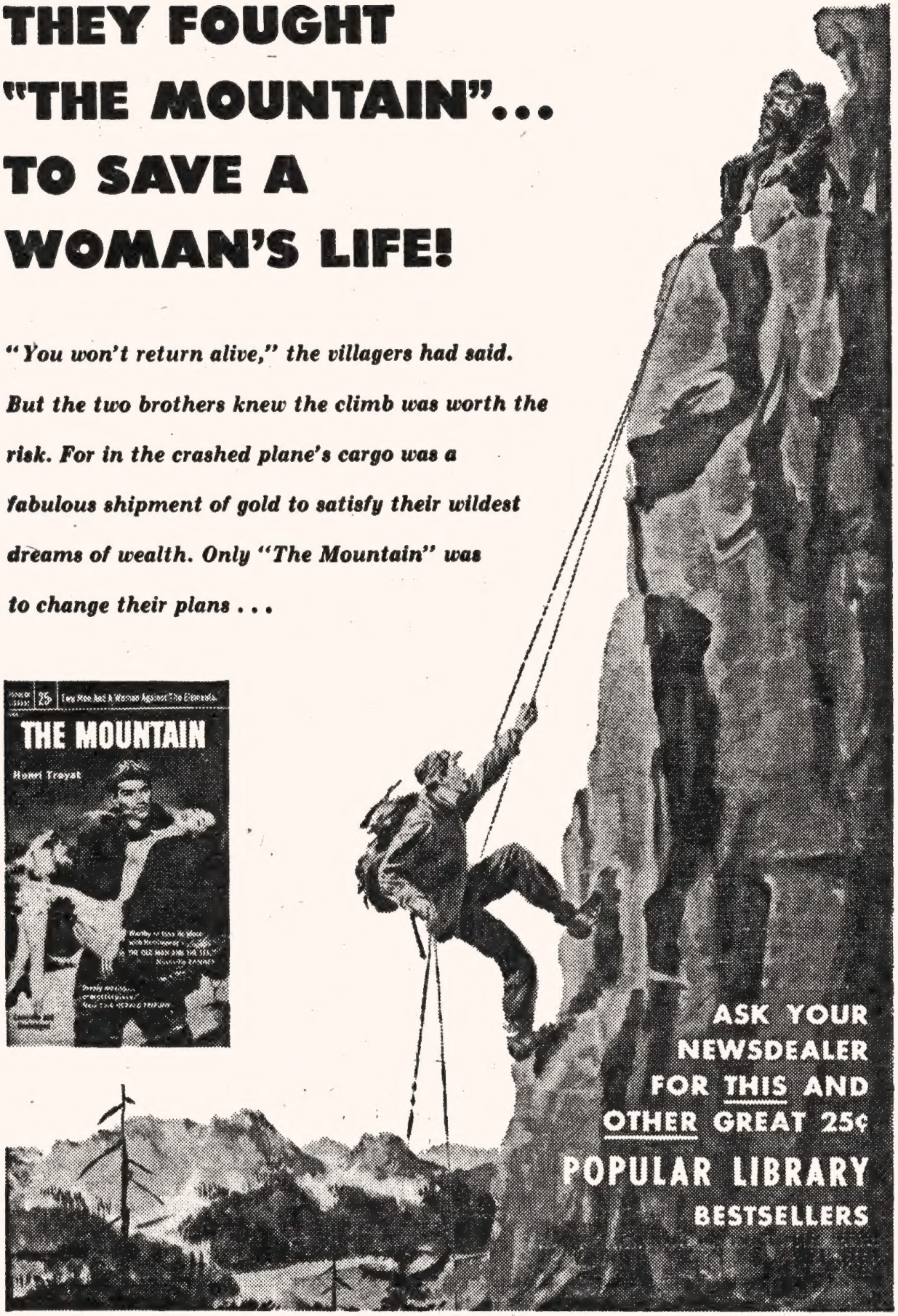
"You won't return alive," the villagers had said. But the two brothers knew the climb was worth the risk. For in the crashed plane's cargo was a fabulous shipment of gold to satisfy their wildest dreams of wealth. Only "The Mountain" was to change their plans . . .



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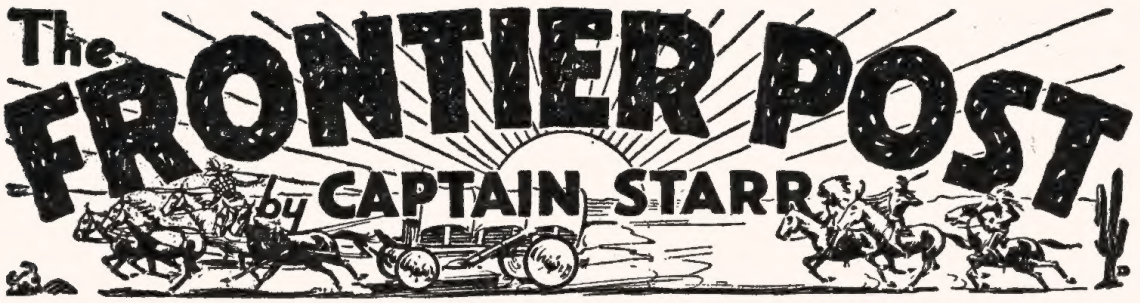

Bizarre Bombardment of a Badman

A VOICE called, "Come on out, Joe. We got your shack surrounded and we mean business." The words cut the silence of the chilled Montana air.

From inside the cabin there was only an ominous silence. Then two of the group of grim men edged for the door and kicked it open. Suddenly from within there was the flash and roar of a rifle and then another, and one of the men fell to the ground and lay still. The other, clutching his bloody shoulder, staggered back to the body of heavily armed men who were now in firing position and pouring shots into the stout cabin from behind trees and rocks.

It was the winter of 1864 and the men were vigilantes going about the task of rounding

up the notorious Plummer gang, the band of thieves and murderers that had been terrorizing the Montana goldfields. Already a half dozen of the leaders had been strung up, and now the vigilantes were after "Killer Joe" Pizanthia, one of the most savage killers of the outlaw band.

Shooting Siege

The vigilantes continued to spray lead into the log constructed cabin, but an occasional shot fired from inside, showed that "Killer Joe" was still alive and fighting back.

"Let's rush him!" shouted Jed Albers. "Let's rush him and string him to the nearest tree!"

"That wouldn't be wise," cautioned a cooler head. "We'd get him all right, but in the meantime he'd get a couple of us, and that's what we don't want. Been too many good men killed by his kind already."

By this time most of the town of Bannock was at the scene, drawn by the gunfire and the news of the dead vigilante. The spectators crouched behind trees a safe distance from the flying bullets, and watched the proceedings from a ringside seat.

The siege continued for several hours and then one of the vigilantes spoke up.

"I got an idea, boys. How about that cannon that's down at Jake's Blacksmith Shop? Let's pull her up here and blast Killer Joe right out of that cabin."

The cannon referred to was a small howitzer that some enterprising wagon master had gleaned from a Civil War battlefield and had hauled across the plains to ward off Indian attacks. At Bannock he had decided on its general uselesness as well as its great weight and had left it with its supply of ammunition at Jake's Blacksmith Shop.

Artillery Action

"Sounds like a good idea," answered a grizzled miner thoughtfully, "but ain't nobody knows how to fire the dern thing."

"Get it up here and I'll fire it for you boys." The voice was from a newly arrived miner, Pegleg Pomroy, a young crippled man who had been wounded in the war and discharged. "I didn't get this gimpy leg for nothing. After two years with the First Ohio I ought to know how to fire one of them things."

While half the vigilantes held Killer Joe at bay, the other half headed for Jake's Blacksmith Shop and the newly discovered

(Continued on page 113)

MARKED FOR DEATH!

Nobody could shoot it out with Jim Courtright —deadliest gunfighter West of Texas—and live! Yet that's what Luke Short was planning to do. People said he had signed his own death warrant. But Luke had an idea, and if it worked, Courtright's shooting days would very soon be over.

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West of Mirage

A Jim Hatfield Novel by JACKSON COLE

CHAPTER I

The Saddlebum

THE gaudily-dressed rider had signed the hotel register as "Duke Allred," giving no home address. That had been three weeks ago, and old Pop Huston still knew nothing about the man or why he should want to hole up in a God-forsaken west-Texas place like Mirage Junction. In Huston's opinion, Allred was on the dodge. He was

They were a hard-bitten crew with nothing to lose by forcing the Lone Wolf to dig his own grave. They could only hang once. . . .

perched on a stool at the bar now, where Pop was rustling up an order of grub on his little coal-oil stove for the girl who had stepped off the El Paso train an hour ago. She had withdrawn to a table in the far corner of his lobby.

Allred had his usual noonday bottle and glass before him, but he wasn't drinking. He was absorbed in the girl's reflection in Pop's backbar mirror, in a manner that riled the old man. Not that the girl had not intrigued Pop's curiosity, too. Women as well-groomed and downright pretty as this one never left the train at Mirage.

Pop sneaked a glance at the flyspeckled clock. The hands were crawling toward straight-up noon. Within a few minutes now, the old man might know the answer behind Allred's presence in his hotel. He hoped the riddle would not explode in gunplay, with the young lady on hand to witness it.

The old man tried to keep his hands from shaking. It would be disastrous to let Duke Allred know anything was out of the ordinary this morning.

Every day since his arrival, Allred had been drinking heavily, but now his mind was on the girl. That had been obvious from the moment Pop Huston had escorted her into the lobby, after bringing her baggage over from the depot.

Above the sizzling of sowbelly strips in his skillet, Huston heard Allred voice the question he had been expecting:

"Hey, Pop, who's the señorita? How long's she going to be around?"

Huston turned to face Allred, flashing a glance at the clock. Five minutes to twelve. Five more minutes to make sure Allred stayed put, didn't go up to his room and lock himself in.

"Don't know her name or where she's from, Duke," the old man said truthfully. "She's waiting for the Short Line train. Must live over Warbonnet way. Face looks familiar, but I can't place her."

POP, a wizened, bald-headed little gnome, had run Mirage Junction's combination hotel, saloon, post-office and restaurant ever since the narrow-gauge had been built across the Big Bend to meet the overland. He was easy-going as a rule, but was hard put to act friendly to Allred now.

"She looks lonesome," Allred mused, in a lascivious voice which lifted the hackles on the old man's neck. "She needs company."

Allred was a tinhorn sport, vain as a peacock. He kept his black hair slicked down with grease, and wore a huge diamond stickpin in his silk cravat, to match the sparkler on his left hand. The flabby fishbelly-white hand of a parasite who hadn't done an honest day's work in years, Pop had sized him up.

"I think," the old man said carefully, not wanting to rile Allred, "she'd rather be alone, Duke. Something's bothering the girl. Keep's sniffling. Lover's quarrel, most likely."

Allred grinned, sliding off the bar stool and hitching his tailor-made coat.

The girl across the room was about twenty, with wheat-blond hair. Her well-tailored traveling suit of smoky-gray tweed was molded to the voluptuous curves of her body. She obviously was a thoroughbred, not the sort who would welcome any overtures from a tinhorn like Allred.

"If she's recovering from a love affair," Allred chuckled, "maybe I can console her. Aim to try."

Color stained the old man's cheeks. He reached across the bar to lay a detaining hand on Allred's sleeve. "Duke, let her alone. She don't want to talk to nobody. Leave her be."

Allred flicked an invisible speck of lint from the lapel of his garish checkered coat.

"You're fifty years past the age of letting a perty woman rile your blood, Pop. I'm going crazy loafing around this place and I got a way with women, understand?"

Pop Huston knotted his fists, watching Allred saunter toward the girl's table. Then he turned back to his skillet. Three minutes to twelve. Wouldn't be long now until he found out whether Allred carried those silver-mounted Colt .45s for show

or whether he knew how to use them.

In three weeks, Huston hadn't learned a thing about Allred. The man holed up in his room most of the time, taking his horse out for exercise after nightfall. Huston cooked his meals, furnished him whisky at eleven every morning and nine every night. So far Allred hadn't dropped a hint as to why he was waiting here.

Salting and peppering the potatoes, Huston thought, I've got to get Allred away from that girl. Can't let her get mixed up in any shooting scrape, if Allred decides to use his guns.

Mirage Junction was hardly Allred's type of a town. It wasn't a town, for that matter. It consisted of the Southern Pacific depot—an ancient box-car minus its trucks and jacked up on wooden blocks alongside the main line—the water tanks, the Short Line's turntable and cattle loading pens, and Pop's two-story hotel.

The clock hands stood at two minutes to twelve when Pop dished up a healthy serving of spuds, bacon and eggs, filled his one and only china teacup with coffee, and made his way from behind the bar to approach the girl's table.

Duke Allred had seated himself opposite the young woman and was pouring on the charm but, so far as Pop could tell, without much success. The girl was staring out the window, her eyes on the narrow-gauge tracks which angled off into the Big Bend country toward the far, purple line of the Mirage Mountains.

"Here's your dinner, lady," Huston said, glaring at Duke Allred. "You got plenty of time to eat. Short Line train's going to be late, as usual."

The girl dabbed at her eyes with a wisp of lacy handkerchief and smelled the aroma of steaming food without interest.

"Thank you," she said. "When do you expect the Warbonnet train to arrive?"

HUSTON squinted out the grimy window. "Think I see that old wood-burner's smoke right now, far side of that yeller ridge yonder where the tracks disappear into the foothills," he said. "That's twenty mile off. Take the old Number

JIM HATFIELD AND GOLDY

Two teakettle a good hour to make that distance, ma'am. You—you going far?"

The girl picked up her knife and fork. "As far as Yucca Valley . . . What do I owe you for the food, sir?"

Before Huston could say "Four bits," Duke Allred fished out a wallet to display a thick wadding of yellow-backed currency. The bill he tossed at Pop was a fifty.

"Allow me, Miss Travis?" Allred said, and smirked at her.

Pop Huston bristled. So Allred had ferreted out the girl's name so soon, had he? Then the old man's expression softened.

"Travis?" he echoed. "Now I know why you looked so familiar when you stepped off'n the train, ma'am. You'll be Major Ben's daughter, the one who's been going to school in California."

The girl responded to the warmth in the old man's voice.

"Yes—I'm Judy Travis. You knew Dad?"

"Know the Major? Why, he's shipped his cattle ever' fall from the Junction here since he quit the Rangers and took up ranching. Why, I reckon I been forwarding your letters over to the Broken Arrow ranch ever' week for the past three years, miss. The Major will sure be glad to see you back."

Moisture glinted on the girl's lashes. "Then you haven't heard the news," she murmured.

"News, ma'am?"

Judy fished in a velvet reticule and drew out a telegraph flimsy which she handed to Huston. It was addressed to Miss Judith Travis at a sorority house near the campus of the University of California in Berkeley. The old man's lips moved soundlessly as he scanned the message which had brought Judy back to her native Texas:

SORRY TO INFORM YOU THE MAJOR SUFFERED FATAL HEART ATTACK WHILE BREAKING COLTS TODAY. FUNERAL SUNDAY NEXT. WIRE TIME OF ARRIVAL AND WILL HAVE BOB SHERMAN MEET YOUR TRAIN.

JULES RONDO

Handing back the telegram, Huston choked, "Can't tell you how this shocks me, miss. Texas don't breed men like the Major any more. Seems like he was too young to go."

Judy said in a tight voice, "He was. I keep wondering why this wire came from Rondo instead of from Bob Sherman. Bob—"

"Natural thing," Huston said, when her voice trailed off. "Rondo being your Dad's ramrod."

"I know," Judy said. "But the young man I intend to marry—Bob Sherman—was working for Dad. Why didn't he send me word of some kind? I—can't shake off the feeling that Daddy didn't die the way Jules said he did—of a heart attack. He was only fifty-nine, Mr. Huston. His heart was as sound as a dollar."

Huston became aware that Duke Allred was shaking the fifty-dollar yellowback under his nose. The old man snapped testily, "Miss Judy's dinner is on the house, Duke. Under the circumstances, I don't think this is any time to be trying to flirt with the young lady. Suppose you let Miss Judy eat in private?"

Pale spots of anger showed on Allred's cheek-bones as he slid back his chair and stood up.

"I'm sure I gave the lady no offense," he snapped. "You didn't have any call to insinuate—"

But Huston was already heading back to the bar. Through the open doorway of the hotel he saw a cowboy out at the hitch-bar, stripping an ornate silver-trapped saddle off a big sorrel stallion. At this moment the lobby clock began to strike twelve.

ALLRED followed Huston over to the bar and poured himself a drink, anger building up in him.

"I ought to bust you one for embarassing me in front of that girl, Pop," he snarled. "I wasn't annoying her."

"Shut up," Huston snapped. "I got another customer coming in."

Allred glanced over his shoulder nervously. A tall, bleak-faced stranger stood in the doorway, a man in batwing chaps, flat-crowned Stetson and spurred Coffeyville boots, a flashy saddle on one shoulder. He glanced around the room uncertainly, caught sight of Pop Huston and came hesitantly forward to deposit the ornate double-rigged saddle on the counter alongside Duke Allred. He said in a dull, bone-tired voice, "How much could you advance a saddlebum for this kak, Mister? I'm open to any reasonable offer."

Pop Huston tugged at his lower lip, his eyes studying the stranger. This man who had dubbed himself a saddlebum was in his early thirties, tall and slim, but husky. With a shave and a haircut he might have been handsome. But now his raven-black hair was caked with the alkali of a long trail and in his eyes, of a peculiar greenish-black shade, was a hopeless expression to go with his voice. Two cedar-butted Colt .45s were holstered at his flanks. He appeared to be a run-of-the-mill cowhand, temporarily down on his luck.

"You'd let go of a fine hull like that?" Huston inquired.

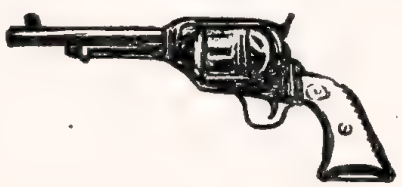
The stranger glanced sideward at Duke Allred, who held a glass of whisky poised mid-way to his lips. Allred's eyes were staring fascinatedly at the glittering burnished silver inlaid on the swellfork pommel of the stranger's gear.

"When a Texan is down to selling his saddle," the tall man admitted bleakly, "he's reached the frayed end of his string. It's an old story, mister. I need money bad, in a hurry. I can get along without such a fancy kak. You can sell it easy enough."

Pop Huston waggled his head somberly. "Not many riders pass through the Junction, feller. Riders with the kind of dinero it would take to pay even half what that rig is worth."

The saddlebum said, "You couldn't match it under a thousand pesos. I won it at a rodea in Tucson two years back. Only grand prize I ever won. I'd like to keep it. But I can't eat it."

Duke Allred set down his shot glass and stepped around behind the tumbleweed



puncher. He lifted the tooled leather skirts of the saddle, examining the exquisite craftsmanship, the bright polish of the Mexican silver decorations.

"I'm sorry," Pop Huston faltered, "but fifty bucks would be the best offer I could make, stranger. You couldn't take that."

The cowpuncher's shoulders slumped. "I got to raise two hundred," he whispered hoarsely. "I got to!"

Duke Allred reached under his lapel and drew out his fancy alligator-skin wallet, his eyes shining with excitement.

"Stranger," he said in a voice calculated to reach Judy Travis' ears, "I believe in helping out a man when he's scraping bottom. I'll give you five hundred for this saddle."

The stranger's rope-calloused hands shook as he accepted the yellow-backed banknote which Allred handed over with a flourish. He stood staring at it, as if unable to believe his eyes.

"Five hundred bucks," he said finally. "Don't see big-denomination currency like this often." He laughed. "This wouldn't be counterfeit, would it, amigo?"

Allred returned the grin. "Redeemable in gold specie at any bank in Texas, stranger. Show it to Pop Huston. He knows a bogus banknote from the real stuff, I reckon."

Pop Huston accepted the bill from the stranger. "Issued by the Third National Bank of Denver, Colorada," he said. "I been banking Mr. Allred's money for nearly a month now, son, with no kicks. I'd say you're safe in closing the deal—and that Allred's got hisself a hell of a good bargain."

THE stranger's next words were low-pitched. "You didn't call me down here on a wild-goose chase, Huston. The serial number checks from muzzle to butt!"

Duke Allred hadn't heard the saddle tramp's enigmatic comment. He was absorbed in inspecting his new possession. He looked up now, suspicion replacing the greed in his eyes as he snarled at the waddy:

"You claim you won this kak in Arizona *two years ago*? Then you're lying! It's got this year's date engraved on the cantle plate. With the words 'Griner's Saddlery, Del Rio, Texas.' You stole this rig, hombre. You can't prove otherwise!"

The stranger fished a shiny metallic object out of his chaps pocket and tossed it on the bar with a chiming ring.

"There's my bill of sale," he said quietly. "Look it over."

Allred stared at the object, his face blanching. It was the silver-ringed star badge of a Texas Ranger.

"Reckon it's time to interduce you boys, Duke," Pop Huston drawled. "This buckaroo happens to be Ranger Jim Hatfield. He wired me yesterday he'd be showing up at high noon today—to arrest you for that pay-roll robbery in Colorada two months back."

CHAPTER II

Bad News for Duke

THE wild look of a trapped animal blazed in Duke Allred's eyes. He fell back from the law badge as if it had been a snake, digging a silver-mounted .45 from holster as he backed away. But the instant before he could whip the gun level, he froze. He was staring at the black bore of Jim Hatfield's big Colt.

In all his years among Border gunslingers, Pop Huston had never seen a chain-lightning draw to match that of this Ranger now!

Allred groaned. His hand sagged, the gun dropped to the sawdust on the floor. Without looking at Huston he ground out:

"You sucked me into a trap, damn you! No Ranger could of trailed me to this hideout. Not all the way from Denver."

"Sure," Huston chuckled. "I telegraphed the Rangers."

Jim Hatfield reached under Allred's coat to take possession of the outlaw's other gun, and the next moment snapped steel handcuffs over Allred's wrists.

"You left a trail of high denomination banknotes all the way across New Mexico and into Texas, Allred," the Ranger said quietly. "When you showed up here in Mirage Junction flashing big bills like they was chicken feed, Mr. Huston notified Austin Ranger headquarters. The credit for nabbing you goes to Huston, not me."

Allred sagged back onto a bar stool, his face drained of color. He lowered his eyes as he caught sight of Judy Travis watching from her table across the room.

"I've got more bad news for you, Allred," Jim Hatfield went on. "I'm charging you with something a lot more serious than stealing a fifty-thousand-dollar payroll in Colorado. I'm holding you for the murder of a deputy sheriff over in Warbonnet three weeks ago."

Before Allred could speak, Pop Huston drawled thoughtfully, "Yeah. Deputy Bob Conyers. He was bushwhacked in Warbonnet two days before Allred showed up here in Mirage to hide out, Hatfield. So that's why he's been lying low in my hotel!"

A whimpering sound broke from Allred, as he choked, "I'll confess to grabbing that Syndicate pay-roll, Ranger. You'll find the rest of the dinero in my saddlebags upstairs. But I never been in Warbonnet in my life! I never killed no deputy!"

The Ranger shrugged. He reached out to touch the diamond stickpin in Allred's cravat.

"I think we'll find," he drawled, "that you were dickering with a Warbonnet jeweler for that necktie pin. Just before that you'd paid for a hundred-dollar stetson at a store in Warbonnet. The man who sold you that hat spotted the serial number on the hundred-dollar bill you'd given him, recognized it as part of that Colorado loot. He reported it to the deputy sheriff in Warbonnet and he cornered you in the jeweler's where you had just bought a diamond stickpin."

Allred shook his head dazedly. "You're lying, Ranger."

"You gunned the deputy down in cold blood," Hatfield went on relentlessly, "and vamoosed without paying for that diamond . . . Mr. Huston, when does the next train leave for Warbonnet? I aim to take Allred over there for that jeweler to identify him as Conyers' killer."

It was at that moment that the penny-whistle of a locomotive, muted by distance, wafted through the hotel doorway.

"Narrow-gauge rattler is pulling in from Warbonnet now, Hatfield," said the hotel man. "You'll have plenty of time to eat before it leaves the Junction, west-bound. You can lock up our prisoner in the grub locker while we mosey upstairs and look over his possibles."

Hatfield made a quick investigation of his prisoner's clothing and appropriated Allred's wallet and diamond tie pin. Then he slapped the skirts of the fancy saddle on the bar.

"This kak was bait to make you voluntarily fork over one of your high-denomination bills, Allred," he explained. "Huston said you had expensive tastes. Your wanting to show off is going to put a hang-rope around your neck, hombre . . ."

IT WAS one-fifteen when Ranger Hatfield released his prisoner from Huston's root cellar and marched him over to where the crew of the Big Bend Short Line was reversing a pint-sized locomotive on the turntable. The Warbonnet train consisted of a miniature baggage car, a box-car and a toy-sized day coach. Riding it would save Hatfield a two-day journey by horseback.

The train crew already had helped Hatfield load Goldy, the lawman's sorrel, aboard the box-car for the trip to Warbonnet. He had borrowed a stock saddle from Huston to replace the fancy silver-spangled hull. That saddle had served its purpose as bait for the Ranger's man-trap today. Huston would ship it back to the saddlery in Del Rio where Hatfield had rented it.

A pot-bellied conductor was waiting at the rear door of the day coach, and from him the Ranger purchased two one-way tickets to Warbonnet. The trainman volunteered the information that the narrow-gauger would not arrive there before three o'clock the next morning.

Following his prisoner into the coach, Hatfield found it empty save for three cowhands who were bound for their back-country ranches on the Short Line. Hatfield selected a seat mid-way down the aisle and ordered Allred to sit next to the window.

Pop Huston came into the coach, toting a hatbox and large valise. He was followed by the young lady Hatfield had seen in the hotel lobby while he had eaten the meal Huston had had waiting for him.

Coming abreast of the Ranger's seat, Huston stowed the girl's baggage in the overhead rack of the seat directly across the aisle from Hatfield's.

"Judy," the old man said, "I want to make you acquainted with Jim Hatfield the Ranger I'm sure you've heard about. I taken the liberty of telling him about the Major . . . Jim, this is Miss Judy Travis, daughter of an old-time Texas Ranger. She's riding as far as her Broken Arrow Ranch over in Yucca Valley."

Before Judy could even acknowledge the introduction the train started with a violent jerk, forcing Huston to make a quick exit.

When the girl had settled herself comfortably Hatfield crossed over to her side of the car and said gravely, "The news of your father's death hit me pretty close to home, Miss Travis. The Major was my training officer at Menard when I was a rookie."

Judy nodded. "I've often heard Dad speak of you, Mr. Hatfield. He called you his 'star pupil.' He was always so proud of your exploits. As what Texan isn't?"

Praise always flustered Hatfield. He switched the subject away from himself abruptly. "Pop Huston got the idea you aren't entirely satisfied with your foreman's version of what happened to the Major, miss. If it would help to discuss it—"

"I've got to talk about it or go crazy," Judy said. "All I know is in this wire I got from Dad's foreman. The Bob Sherman it mentions is my fiancé. I'm puzzled to know why this telegram didn't come from Bob. I have a feeling something is wrong—"

When Hatfield finished reading Rondo's message, he said, "Maybe Sherman was away from the ranch when your father died. But what is this Huston tells me about you doubting that the Major died of natural causes? Do you have any reason to distrust this foreman, Jules Rondo?"

Judy hesitated before answering. Finally she admitted, "I may be treating Rondo unfairly, but I have never trusted him, Ranger. Jules Rondo served a stretch in prison for cattle rustling, years back. Dad was the Ranger who arrested him. When Rondo was paroled after serving three years he looked up Dad at the Broken Arrow and begged for a job. Dad

made Rondo his foreman—against my wishes. Dad thought it was his duty as a citizen to give an ex-convict a chance to go straight. That was ten years ago. I suppose you'd say Rondo is a good foreman."

HATFIELD glanced across the aisle to check up on his prisoner. Duke Allred, manacled arms resting on his lap, was staring moodily out the window at the wheeling Texas flatlands.

"I don't blame you in the least for questioning the facts of your father's death, Miss Travis," the Ranger said, and added quickly, "I'm going to call you Judy, on account of your dad—you call me Jim. Now you probably wondered if this Rondo might have murdered the Major for revenge, haven't you?"

Judy broke into tears, burying her face in her hands.

"I know it's preposterous—Jim. And even when I see Dad in his coffin tomorrow, I'll be no closer to the truth."

Hatfield said gently, "When I clean up my chores in Warbonnet I'll drop in to see the county coroner. If there was anything suspicious about the Major's death, he'll tell me."

The girl went on, "I own the Broken Arrow now. I'll never go back to finish at the university. I think the first thing I'll do will be to fire Jules Rondo, and put Bob Sherman in his place. Bob's young, but after all, when he is my husband he will be running the spread anyway."

She was trembling. Her haggard features told Hatfield that she probably had not slept during the train journey from Berkeley.

"We've got a monotonous trip ahead of us tonight, Judy," he said. "Why don't you curl up and go to sleep? When is this ox-cart we're on due at the Broken Arrow?"

"The conductor said around midnight. I telegraphed Rondo to have Bob meet me at the siding nearest the ranch."

Hatfield stood up. "You try and rest, then. If you're asleep when we reach your stop, I'll rouse you."

Almost the time Hatfield had sat down beside his prisoner in the opposite seat, she was already asleep.

The Short Line rattler continued its jerky progress into the Big Bend wastelands, finally making a ten-minute halt around five o'clock at a tank siding to take on water and discharge a load of freight for a rancher who was waiting alongside the tanks with a wagon.

Sundown found the little train chuffing up the long grade of Gunsight Pass. It was dark by the time the summit station was reached, and Judy Travis was still sleeping soundly.

As darkness enveloped the Mirage range, the train groped around at a crawling pace, down the looping curves west of the Pass. It was nine o'clock when Hatfield was roused out of a half-doze by the violent application of the brakes.

The narrow-gauge cars came to a jolting halt, awakening Judy Travis. She stared out the window at the moonlighted landscape, then turned her head and met Jim Hatfield's eyes.

"I wonder," she complained drowsily, "if this toy train ever made a trip between Warbonnet and the Junction without breaking down. We're not supposed to stop here."

Hatfield shrugged. "We haven't reached Yucca Valley yet. Must be fifty miles short of your father's ranch."

The train men were shouting outside, then the front door of the coach opened to admit the pot-bellied, blue-jumpered conductor, who had not set foot inside the passenger car since the train left Mirage Junction.

"Rockslide's blocked a cut just ahead of the cowcatcher, gents," the harrassed conductor called. "Take time to shovel the dirt off'n the tracks. I'd be obliged if you menfolks would lend a hand. More help I get, quicker we can get rolling."

The three cowhands who had been playing cards at the rear end of the coach made their way past Hatfield's seat to the conductor, who was unlocking a tool box at the front of the coach. The trainman began passing out short-handled shovels,

joshing with the cowhands. That led Hatfield to believe that blocked tracks on the Short Line were a common hazard of travel in this part of Texas.

WHEN the three punchers had trooped out of the car, the conductor turned to Hatfield. For the first time he noticed the handcuffs on Duke Allred's wrists.

"I see," he grunted. "A lawman riding herd on a hard case. Reckon that excuses you from shoveling duty, then."

Hatfield came to his feet, beckoning to Allred to follow him.

"I'll lock up my prisoner," he said, "and lend you a hand, Conductor. I'm as anxious to get this train rolling as you are."

The trainman handed him a shovel, muttering his thanks. Behind them, Judy Travis watched the Ranger herd Duke Allred out onto the front platform of the day coach.

The glare of the conductor's lantern revealed the heavy iron beam of the brake wheel. Taking a key from his shirt pocket, Hatfield unlocked the fetter from Allred's left wrist and notched it around the brake beam.

"That'll keep you from straying while I'm up ahead, Duke," he said. As he headed down the steps after the conductor, he added, "I'd let you help dig, if it was daylight. As it is I can't take any chances of you trying to hightail into the chaparral."

Allred made a profane comment and hunkered down on the coach platform.

CHAPTER III

Mystery in the Mirages

IN FRONT of the locomotive, Hatfield saw where several tons of dirt and loose rock had spilled down from the lip of a narrow cutbank, blocking the tracks. The fireman, engineer, brakeman and baggageman were busy shoveling dirt off the roadbed, assisted by the three passengers. The funneling beam of the diminutive locomotive headlight provided ample light for their work.

After the long hours of confinement in the ill-ventilated coach, Hatfield welcomed a few minutes' heavy labor in the crisp night air. With this large a crew busy, the track should be cleaned inside of half an hour.

The Ranger was levering a heavy boulder off the rails when he caught sight of something in the glare of the headlight. Stooping to pick it up, he saw what looked like a frayed ribbon of waxy paper, slightly burned at the edges. Lifting it to his nostrils, Hatfield identified the peculiar acrid odor instantly.

His jaw locking grimly, he walked over to where the baggageman and the conductor were scooping gravel off the crossties.

"Conductor," Hatfield said in a low voice, "this rockslide wasn't an accident. A dynamite charge set it off."

The conductor stared at the scrap of twisted paper in the Ranger's hand, instantly recognizing it for what it was—part of a wrapper from a stick of dynamite!

"There would be only one reason for wanting to stop my train!" he exclaimed. "Bandits honing to rob the mail car! Andy, get back there and make sure everything's all right!"

The baggageman lurched over to the cutbank, snatched up a Winchester rifle, and the conductor's lantern. Jim Hatfield, guns palmed, followed the baggageman back to the car immediately behind the locomotive tender. The steel sliding door was shut, its massive padlock intact.

"False alarm," the man called. Andy grunted nervously. "At least, so far."

Hatfield said in a whisper, "Unlock that door and get inside, Andy. Your job is guarding that mail and express."

Andy shook his head. "Nothing doing, stranger. For all I know you might be a mail robber yourself."

Hatfield produced his Ranger badge. It

had immediate effect. Andy unlocked the mail car door and climbed in, slamming it shut immediately and bolting it from the inside.

This had been the critical moment, when the mail car door had been open. But nothing had happened. All around landscape was as peaceful as ever. Breathing a heavy sigh of relief, Hatfield returned to the rockslide and resumed shoveling.

After another forty minutes' work, the tracks were clear.

The conductor said in a shaky voice, "Whoever blasted this slide must of lost their nerve when it came to sticking up the train."

"Just the same," growled the engineer, "let's highball. They could have us covered from the brush right this minute!"

Hatfield himself was inclined to believe the scare had been groundless. The dynamite wrapper could have come from explosives used by the grading crews when they had blasted out the cut. But that couldn't be true. The odor of dynamite fumes had been too strong, and the paper had been fresh and unweathered.

The train crew climbed back aboard the locomotive cab. The conductor followed Hatfield and the three cowhands along the cinder apron of the right-of-way to the coach at the end of the train.

Hatfield was swinging up the platform steps when suddenly he froze, staring at a piece of shiny metal lying on the platform at the base of the rusty brake-wheel beam.

"My prisoner's gone!" he yelled, and whirled on the conductor. "You saw me shackle him to that rod!"

A HARSH oath exploded from the conductor as he played the lantern's rays on the shiny metal on the platform floor. It was half of Hatfield's steel handcuffs. The connecting link had been chiseled in two. Lying to one side were the tools used in affecting Duke Allred's escape, some time during the past hour—a heavy maul and chisel, from the conductor's tool-box.

"Your prisoner couldn't of got them tools out of the coach locker himself!" the conductor yelled. "Only one answer to that. The young lady passenger was the only one in the car. Your prisoner must of talked her into fetching that chisel and sledge-hammer!"

Hatfield leaped up the coach steps. That explanation seemed the only feasible one—but it seemed impossible that a girl like Judy Travis should willingly help a suspected murderer escape Ranger law!

The Lone Wolf—as Hatfield had been dubbed by his boss, old Cap'n Bill McDonnell, long ago, slammed open the coach door and barged inside, past the yawning door of the conductor's tool lock. The three cowpunchers had just returned their shovels there.

"Judy!" Hatfield yelled, heading into the car. "Did you—"

He broke off, his aghast expression drawing curious stares from the three punchers.

Judy Travis' seat was empty. The girl was not in the car. And more than that, her hatbox and valise had vanished from the overhead baggage rack.

Hatfield heard the paunchy conductor snicker behind him.

"What is it the Frenchies say—*'cherchez la femme'*?" the trainman chuckled. "Plain as the nose on your face, Johnny Law. While we were working on that blocked roadbed up front, our pretty young lady fetched tools out of my locker and smashed that handcuff chain. With all the noise we were making with our shovels and crowbars, we couldn't hear it. I got a hunch that girl was your prisoner's wife or sweetheart, on the train a-purpose!"

A cold rime of sweat broke from the Ranger's pores. The conductor's explanation was the obvious one—that Judy had helped Allred escape—but he was positive it was not the real answer.

"Loan me that lantern," Hatfield snapped. "Hold this train until I've had a try at cutting their sign."

The conductor surrendered his lantern without protest.

"I'll tell you something else I've figured

out," he said pompously. "You were right about somebody blasting that dirt over the tracks. Whoever done it knew your prisoner was aboard. He stopped us to set that walloper loose, not to rob the mail car."

Hatfield crowded past the portly conductor and went back to the rear platform.

"That's impossible," he snapped, over his shoulder. "My prisoner had no known confederates. Even if he had, they would have had no way of knowing he was riding this train from Mirage. That's what has me stumped. Who stopped the train? Whoever it was also smashed Allred's cuffs. That girl didn't, you can bet your life on that."

Descending the platform steps, the Lone Wolf searched the ground alongside the car carefully for sign. If Judy and Allred had descended those steps, their footprints had been blotted out by all those returning to board the car a few moments ago.

Up ahead, the engineer was clanging his bell impatiently, unable to open his throttle until the conductor waved the lantern in the highball signal.

Hatfield was thinking, however Allred got away, he must have forced Judy Travis to go along as a hostage!

Before he could whip his gun level, Allred was facing the black bore of Jim Hatfield's Colt

He made his way along the side of the coach, studying every inch of the ground for footprints. Judy's high heels should leave a plain trail. But no one had walked along this soft dirt while the train had been stopped.

THEN, reaching the end of the car, Hatfield had his answer. As clear as print on a book, the lantern light revealed

the deep heel-prints of a woman's shoe, alighting from the back step.

Judy had left the coach by these steps. Her tracks led across the cinder roadbed toward the north edge of the right-of-way.

She had not been alone. Her footprints were bracketed on either side by the larger prints of men's boot soles. The man on her right had been Duke Allred—Hatfield's photographic memory for details identified one square-toed print as having been made by the box toe of Allred's fancy cowboots.

The other set of tracks, then, belonged to whoever had engineered Allred's escape from the handcuffs. The conductor must have been correct. Someone had dynamited a cutbank to block the tracks, ahead of the train's approach. Someone who had known that Duke Allred was on board, and in Ranger custody!

"But that's impossible!" Hatfield muttered. "There wasn't a soul in Mirage Junction to see me arrest Allred, except Pop Huston. And if Pop had wanted to turn Allred loose, he couldn't have beat the train over the Pass."

The conductor was heading down the tracks, yelling impatiently. Ignoring him, Hatfield bent low, following the triple trail of Judy and the two men who had accompanied her off the car.

The tracks led off the right-of-way into a dense hedge of flowering agarita scrub. Breasting his way through that tangle of foliage, Hatfield picked up the trail on the far side.

The tracks were easy to follow in the sandy soil. Judy's high-heeled footprints were significantly changed now—they were dragging zigzag furrows across the dirt.

She was kidnaped! Hatfield thought quietly. They had to drag her. Whoever turned Allred loose knew he had to get rid of a witness—

Twenty feet from the railroad tracks, the trail vanished into another motte of brush. On the far side of this obstruction, Hatfield's lantern revealed another story.

Two horses had been staked here, waiting for the Short Line train to arrive at the blocked track. The horse owned by Allred's mysterious benefactor, and another saddler, for Allred's getaway. They hadn't figured on Judy being a witness to their getaway.

The hoof prints led off in a northerly direction—fresh tracks, made within the past thirty minutes. A sickish sensation invaded the Lone Wolf. Allred and his rescuer and the girl they had undoubtedly kidnaped could be two or three miles away by now.

"Hey!" The conductor's angry voice snapped Hatfield back to reality. "I can't hold this train indefinitely, even for a lawman!"

Hatfield turned to face the ruddy-faced trainman who was worming his way through the brush.

"That girl didn't have anything to do with my prisoner's escape," Hatfield snapped. "She was kidnaped because she saw what happened. For all I know she may be already dead, lying out there in the brush somewhere."

The portly conductor shrugged. "Sorry if that happened, but I got a schedule to keep, feller. Nothing we can do about it now."

Hatfield headed back toward the stalled train, the conductor puffing at his side.

"There is something *I* can do about it," the Ranger snapped. "Get that box-car opened. I want my saddle horse unloaded."

The conductor's jaw sagged open. "You aiming to let the train leave you behind—out here in this neck of nowhere in the dead of night?"

Hatfield nodded grimly. "Those owl-hooters left a plain trail to follow. I'm not thinking so much about my prisoner as I am that girl."

BACK at the box-car sandwiched between the coach and the mail car, the conductor trundled the door open and bawled an order to his brakeman who was waiting in the engine cab. In moments the three men had an unloading ramp in place and Hatfield was leading

Goldy down to solid ground.

"Don't be a fool, man!" the conductor protested. "You're wide open for ambush, a bright moonlight night like this. And you know you're facing two to one odds out there."

Hatfield ignored that protest, too, as he helped the brakeman hoist the ramp back into the box-car.

"*'Sta bueno,*" the Ranger said. "You're free to highball out of here."

The conductor closed the box-car door and, muttering, reached out to shake Hatfield's hand.

"Don't expect to see you ride out of these mountains alive, feller. For my report, mind telling me your name? All I know about you is that you bought a ticket for Warbonnet."

Over his handshake, the lawman said, "Jim Hatfield, Texas Ranger. I'd appreciate it if you'd telegraph my headquarters in Austin as soon as you reach Warbonnet tonight. Tell Cap'n McDowell I had the bad luck to loose the prisoner I arrested at the Junction this noon. Tell Cap'n Bill not to send any help out looking for me. I lost him. It's my responsibility to round him up."

The conductor's eyes showed that he had been properly impressed by the knowledge of this Ranger's identity. "Jim Hatfield!" he repeated. He well knew the name, that of a lawman whose feats had made him a living legend throughout the Lone Star State. "The Lone Wolf! Well! Then all I can say, son, is that I wouldn't want to be them wallopers, having you trailing me tonight. Good luck. I'll wire Austin for you."

Hatfield turned away, tightening the cinch of the saddle on Goldy. He was mounted, riding back to where he had last seen the trail of Judy's kidnapers when the Warbonnet train got under way.

A sensation of utter loneliness, as if he were marooned on the moon, settled over Jim Hatfield as he watched the red and green tail-lights of the railway coach disappear from view around a bend in the track downgrade. He was on his own now, in as desolate a stretch of malpais as he would find anywhere in Texas.

He was not thinking about Duke Allred's fantastic escape now, however. That mystery was too much to grapple with tonight. He could not bring himself to accept the theory that his prisoner had had a confederate waiting here in the Mirages to rescue him.

Uppermost in Hatfield's mind tonight was Judy Travis. That she had been forced off the train against her will, he was positive. They must have gagged her, otherwise she would have screamed an alarm.

He turned off the right-of-way and reined up at the point where Allred's rescuer had been waiting with the two saddle horses. Somewhere off in the night, Allred and Judy and the rider with them might be holed up within gunshot range, waiting for him to show up.

Allred had known that his captor had a fast mount in the box-car up front. And he and his rescuer must both have known it was a foregone conclusion that he, Hatfield, would take up the chase.

Dismounting, for afoot he could follow sign better in the moonlight, Hatfield headed off along the double row of hoof-tracks. A hundred yards from the railroad, the trail vanished suddenly into the shadowy maw of a canyon which formed a deep cleft in the Mirage slopes, leading for miles toward Yucca Valley.

Further tracking, he realized then, would be impossible before daylight. To invade that shadow-clotted fissure on the assumption that Judy's abductors would continue down the canyon would be to risk losing their trail altogether and wasting precious hours. To say nothing of the hazard of running into a gun trap.

THE RANGER stripped the saddle off Goldy. There was nothing he could do but wait for sunrise, a good six hours off. And anything could happen to Judy Travis in that time!

Having one horse carrying double would slow them down, Hatfield thought dully. Their best bet would be to kill the girl and hide her body.

In the remote distance he could hear the train rumbling westward, making up time. Here, at the two-thousand-foot level, Hatfield could see completely across Yucca Valley's hundred-mile width. The lights of Warbonnet town made a glow against the Christos Mountains to the northwest. Somewhere in the black gulf of the valley was Major Ben Travis' Broken Arrow Ranch.

Judy's story came back to haunt Hatfield. Ben Travis was dead. His ranch had been ramrodded—it still was—by an ex-convict who had taken advantage of the old man's merciful nature.

Suddenly Hatfield's theories about Allred's escape took a different turn. Perhaps the train had been halted as a means of preventing Judy Travis from ever reaching the Broken Arrow and learning the truth about her father's death!

CHAPTER IV

Ambush Bullet

DAYLIGHT'S first rosy glow was limning the low peaks of the Mirage divide when Ranger Jim Hatfield roused from a four-hour sleep.

One of the secrets of the big lawman's amazing endurance was his ability to rest when opportunity afforded itself. With Goldy grazing nearby, Hatfield had known he was safe in catching up on his sleep, taking advantage of time he could not put to use otherwise. The big golden stallion would warn him if he scented danger in the night.

Full daylight was filtering into the canyon when he put Goldy below the rim, picking up the double set of hoof prints leading into the gulch. He rode with his gun out of holster, his eyes fixed on the next turn of the canyon. He might be heading into an ambush trap.

Once, dismounting to lead Goldy through a thick tangle of thorny junco, he spotted a tatter of blue-gray tweed suiting caught on a bush, high enough off the trail to tell him that Judy Travis was still on horseback at this point in their flight.

A mile below the entrance of the canyon, the Ranger found evidence to prove that Allred and his accomplice had halted their horses. Boot prints were plain in the sandy loam under the overhanging cliffs. So were the prints of Judy's shoes.

Hatfield decided, Got too dark for them to keep going. They knew they were safe, that they could hear me coming a mile away if I tried stalking them by night.

How long had the kidnapers waited here? The entire night? If so, then they might not have much of a head start on him, after all.

The Ranger made a thorough hunt around the camp ground, dreading what he might see behind the next boulder, around the next motte of brush. It seemed incredible that they would want to burden themselves with Judy Travis, when it would be so simple to put a slug in her head and dump her somewhere off the trail.

But he found nothing. A mild breeze was blowing up the canyon toward him, but it telegraphed no sound of hoofbeats on the rocky bottom.

Back in saddle, Hatfield headed on down-canyon, losing the trail at times, but invariably picking it up again. The hunted men passed side draw after side draw without leaving the main gorge. It was obvious that they were heading toward Yucca Valley, at the western foot of the Mirage range.

Noon found Hatfield almost out of the mountain. Each turn of the canyon gave him glimpses of the broad, sagebrush-stippled expanse of the Yucca Valley cattle range. The hoofprints he was tracking were still clearly visible.

Then the rimrocks fell away and Hatfield faced the open valley. He could see the line of telegraph poles marching away into the distance to the southward, marking the line of the narrow gauge railroad to Warbonnet. Longhorn cattle grazed on

the prairie. In the distance sunlight glinted on a brimming water tank under a lazing windmill on a high tower.

Uncasing his field-glasses, the Lone Wolf spent long minutes studying the vista ahead, hoping against hope to catch sight of Allred and Judy and the third rider. Dust devils appeared and disappeared out on the flats, tricking him into thinking they were caused by riders.

From here on, he would be in the open, risking the hazards of an ambush, for there were innumerable barrancas eroded out of the floor of the valley where gunmen could fort up and wait for him to leave the foothills. But the trail of Judy's abductors led straight out from the mouth of the canyon, in the direction of a meandering green line of willows and cottonwoods marking the creek which drained the Mirage uplands.

HUNGER was gnawing at Hatfield, but he was carrying no provisions in his saddlebags, not even a canteen of water. When he had left Mirage Junction he had assumed that he and Goldy would go by train as far as Warbonnet.

The sun had begun to wester when Hatfield reached a shallow running stream which he knew to be Salido Creek. Running south along the edge of Yucca Valley, it emptied its alkaline waters into the Rio Grande.

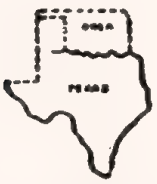
Here, the trail he was following vanished without trace. Allred and the man who had halted the Short Line train had spurred straight into Salido Creek, and their tracks did not emerge on the west bank.

Letting Goldy drink sparingly, Hatfield tried to make up his mind what to do next. Obviously his quarry had taken to the running stream to wipe out their spoor. Not even a bloodhound would be able to tell whether they had turned north or south.

For the first time, Jim Hatfield became doubtful of his chances of overtaking the three riders. He tried to put himself in his erstwhile prisoner's place. Duke Allred, facing a murder charge in Texas, might head directly for the Rio Grande and the sanctuary of Old Mexico. If that was the case, Hatfield knew he should turn south, down the Salido. But if Allred

A TALL TEXAS TALE

The Hole Sad Story



AUNT SUSIE and Uncle John were bankrupt. The creditors had taken everything except her collection of string and his collection of doughnut holes.

"Well, John," said she, "we're not licked yet. After all, you're only ninety-five and I'm two years younger. We'll get a stake somehow."

That night they sat up late making a fish net of the doughnut holes and string, so they could catch some fish for breakfast. When they finally did go to bed Uncle John had a nightmare; it ran around the room and got tangled in the fish net. So they took it to the Greenmont races and, believe it or not, it won first place.

With the purse money the old people started a horse ranch. They kept on making fish nets and trapping nightmares for breeding stock. But finally they used the last of John's doughnut holes and he ate so many doughnuts to get more holes he died of a stomach ache.

—*Mrs. Ed Rogers*

had turned north—

He decided to patrol both banks of the creek for a couple of miles, upstream and downstream, studying the muddy banks for hoofprints which might reveal where the riders had left the water to head overland.

Carrying out that plan, Hatfield put Goldy down the east bank of the creek, heading southward until he came to the trestle where the Big Bend Short Line crossed the stream. There Hatfield forded the creek and retraced his way up the west bank, north-bound, until he was back at the spot where the escaping kidnapers had first entered the water.

A growing despair was in Hatfield as he kept going northward. He had covered two miles in that direction and was thinking of fording across to the east bank when a glint of sunlight on submerged metal caught his eye.

Spurring out into the water, Hatfield dismounted in the icy, knee-deep flow and recovered the shiny object. It was a tobacco can, dropped here so recently that its revenue label had not come unglued, and the shiny tin had not had time to rust.

Any passing cowpuncher might have tossed his empty tobacco can into the creek here. But that did not seem likely, for there were no tracks leading into or out of the Salido. Maybe the can had been thrown into the creek miles upstream and had floated this far.

And then Hatfield saw something else. Deep indentations in the sandy rippled bottom of the creek. Horses had passed this way, north-bound, and recently enough that the sluicing waters of the creek had not had time to fill up the hoof tracks.

This was his first definite clue. Two horses, working their way upstream. The creek was shallow; horses could make good time in the hock-deep water, without leaving trail sign on the banks.

Hatfield put Goldy up the creek until he came to a bend of the Salido where spring freshets had scooped out a deep pool. Here he saw unmistakable evidence of where two horsemen had spurred their mounts along the edge of the pool to get to the shallows beyond.

Rolling hills dotted with bunchgrass and stunted juniper on the creek banks now restricted the Ranger's field of vision. But the belief that he was on the right track kept him on edge, fired his hopes.

SUNSET glow was tinting the western sky when he came to a spot where the plunging creek flowed out of a deep-ending gulch. Rocks and willowbrake up ahead looked like rough going for riders.

They left the creek somewhere south of me, Hatfield decided, despair in him deepening. I missed the sign. And it'll be dark in another hour.

Spurring Goldy out of the creek bed, Hatfield came in sight of a wooden bridge spanning the Salido's gulch. A weather-beaten signboard marked a Y-fork of a wagon road leading out of the mountains.

He headed toward the road fork. He must have covered a good twenty miles during the afternoon, but was not sure where he was. Reigning up, he studied the faded letters painted on the topmost of the two boards.

The sign pointing northwest read:

WARBONNET 25 MI.

The other sign was angled southwest where a wagon road twisted through the rolling hills bordering the Yucca Valley flats. It was labeled:

BROKEN ARROW RANCH, 15 MI.

Broken Arrow Ranch. Judy Travis' home. Finding this signboard seemed almost like an omen to Jim Hatfield.

He could reach the Travis ranch in three hours' riding. There he would find Judy's intended husband, Bob Sherman, and the ex-convict who was the Broken Arrow foreman, Jules Rondo.

With the sinking sun full in his eyes, Hatfield turned Goldy southwestward on the Broken Arrow road. The sorrel broke into a jog-trot, relieved to be free of the hampering current of Salido Creek.

Cattle were grazing close to the barbed wire fences flanking the road. Sleek shorthorns, bearing Major Ben Travis' brand. He was on Judy's home range, then. That

knowledge accentuated Hatfield's growing desperation over the girl's whereabouts. It was maddening, not knowing if she were dead or alive.

The road veered due west, looping into a gap between two hogbacks which cut off Hatfield's view of the sun. It would be dark before he arrived at the Broken Arrow, and he was not at all sure that he would meet a friendly reception there. If Judy Travis' kidnaping had been engineered by Jules Rondo, the Broken Arrow might even prove to be a death trap for any outsider arriving there.

He kept wondering if Bob Sherman had met Judy's train at midnight. If the train had halted, then Judy's financé would have learned of her mysterious disappearance from the conductor.

Hatfield was deeply absorbed with thoughts concerning his forthcoming arrival at the ranch when a gunshot shattered the twilight hush. A rifle bullet ricocheted off a ledge of scab-rock in front of Goldy.

The big sorrel reared violently, as Hatfield made an instinctive grab for gun butt. In the same instant he saw the flash of a bore-flame midway up the shadowed side of the ridge to his right, where an ambusher was bellied down behind an outthrust of lava.

Something like a hot iron seared the back of Hatfield's neck. Only his instinctive grab for the saddle-horn kept the bullet's grazing impact from knocking him out of stirrups.

Hatfield's pull on the reins put Goldy into a tight, bucking circle. Hatfield could feel a cold numbness running down his backbone. The drygulcher's slug had come dangerously close to nicking his spinal cord.

Shaking off unconsciousness, and with the dead weight of his sixgun proving too much for his strength, Hatfield was vaguely aware that the drygulcher was still firing as fast as he could pump the lever of his Winchester. Bullets made their shrill, spiteful whine about as he struggled to get Goldy under control and stick in the saddle.

DARKNESS was funneling in around him. He felt the viscid flow of blood coursing down his back, wetting his shirt. A blinding veil was creeping over Hatfield and he was powerless to combat that sinking sensation. He was on the way out —he was certain of it.

He was carrying a rifle in his saddle scabbard but he knew he could never haul it free of the boot. The tricky light had saved him so far, but he could not draw his own gun and shoot it out with that bushwhacker up there on the ridge.

Looping his reins over the Brazos horn of the saddle, Pop Huston had loaned him, he gave Goldy his head. Instinct, quite apart from any thought-out plan in his reeling brain, made Hatfield reach for the coiled reata on the pommel.

Goldy was heading along the road at a hard gallop now. Bushwhack lead was following the big stallion as he raced at top speed past the drygulcher's location higher up the slope.

The Ranger's only chance now was to stick with Goldy. The big sorrel might keep running, carry him out of danger. But he would have to tie himself to the saddle, before the creeping paralysis brought oblivion.

He looped turn after turn of the pleated rawhide lass'-rope around his wrists, lashing himself to the saddle-horn. Goldy was fast carrying him out of rifle range of the gunman behind him.

Jim Hatfield sagged forward over the saddle-horn, thrusting his cowboots deeper into the oxbows. He was vaguely conscious of Goldy's mane whipping his face. He could feel the wind tug at the chinstrap of his stetson.

And then the mounting agony of the bullet wound on his neck reached the vital nerve centers in the Ranger's skull. He seemed to be drifting off into space, floating free of the galloping sorrel.

Then even that sensation was gone, and the Lone Wolf was lost in an endless black void without substance and without meaning.

Goldy hammered on through the gathering dusk, leaving the Broken Arrow

road to strike blindly off across the open hills. The rider roped to his saddle might have been a dead man, so limply was his weight sagging in the stirrups.

CHAPTER V

Indian Wickiup

JIM HATFIELD came back to consciousness with his boots touching solid earth, the full weight of his body hanging from the ropes which bound his wrists to the saddle-horn.

He had fallen from saddle then, and Goldy had had savvy enough to halt instead of dragging his rider. The sorrel's nose was nuzzling the Ranger's cheek as the red fog of oblivion slowly lifted from his brain.

Hatfield put his weight on his boots. His knees felt rubbery, from loss of blood, and fever was burning in his veins.

"Whoa, Goldy. Steady—steady, boy."

It took all the strength left in his arms for him to untangle them from the reata loops. When he finally freed himself from the supporting saddle-horn he slumped to his knees, violently sick.

When the reaction had passed, Hatfield leaned against Goldy's braced forelegs and looked around.

A full moon was in the sky. Its argent light painted the landscape with eerie light and shadows, silver and ebony. He made out the jagged peaks of the Mirage range, miles to his right. Goldy had run a long way from the ambush site.

This was not the first time in his life that Jim Hatfield owed his survival to his golden stallion. The caked lather on Goldy's flanks told what a fast gait the sorrel had hit across country. There was no way for Hatfield to tell in what direction the horse had galloped. Nor could he recognize which dent on the saw-toothed Mirage skyline was Gunsight Pass.

His guns, surprisingly, were still in their holsters. Blood had dried on the back of his shirt, gluing it to the skin. When he reached up to examine the bullet crease on his neck there was no feeling there except a tingling numbness.

He had had a close call, a damned close call. A shaving deeper and the bullet would have killed him or, worse, paralyzed him for life.

If the bushwhacker had been Duke Allred, then he had borrowed a rifle from his rescuer. They had probably known that Hatfield was on their trail up Salido Creek all yesterday afternoon, and had purposely holed up and waited for him to come within easy range. Only the failing light had kept the bushwhacker from bagging his target, at the pay-off.

One thing stood out as significant in Hatfield's mind. The bushwhacking had occurred on the Broken Arrow road. That pointed up his hunch that Judy had been the object of the train hold-up last night, not Allred.

His mind was too fuzzy to think about it now. Thirst was torturing him, and hunger. But infection was his greatest threat now. He had to get medical attention, and soon.

He found it impossible to climb back aboard Goldy. He would have to walk—but in what direction? The surrounding hills were totally foreign territory to the Lone Wolf.

Goldy was whickering plaintively, pawing the dirt. He scented something. Water, maybe. Or danger.

"You want to keep moving, boy?" Hatfield muttered, getting a good grip on the bridle. "Then let's go. I'll tag along where you lead, old feller. I've got no choice."

Goldy started forward, following the low ground between two ridges. Leaning heavily on the horse's shoulder, Hatfield could walk without falling down.

The attack on him from ambush had come at sundown. Judging by the moon's position in the sky now, and the growing ribbon of color behind the Mirage peaks, daylight was not far off. He had been unconscious all night then. It was impossible

to tell whether Goldy had carried him a mile, or fifty miles from the site of the ambuscade.

A FAMILIAR scent reached Hatfield's nostrils—cottonwood and dank willowbrake. Goldy had sniffed water and was heading toward it. An overwhelming sense of humbleness touched the man then, realizing how much the stallion had needed water, but this close to a spring had stood hitched rather than drag his unconscious rider through rocks and brush.

Rounding the shoulder of a hogback, Hatfield came in sight of a pool of water this side of a dark hedge of green thicket, water which reflected the Texas stars on its placid surface. Bullfrogs were trilling as horse and man made their slow approach to the pool. The odor of wet mud was rank in Hatfield's nostrils.

The possibility of slaking his intemperate thirst put new energy in Jim Hatfield. He quickened his gait to match the sorrel's, and in moment was falling headlong beside the muddy rim of the pool, plunging his fevered head into the cool water.

He drank deeply, then reared back to his knees, aware that Goldy had headed up and was pricking his ears in the opposite direction from the willow scrub.

Peering under Goldy's barrel, Hatfield saw something that until now had escaped his notice—an Indian's wickiup built of mud and ocotillo wands, and roofed with scraps of ancient tarpaulin.

Someone was emerging from the wickiup, coming out toward the water hole. Hatfield dropped a hand to gun butt, moving to one side and getting shakily to his legs as the figure approached.

Goldy curveted around to face the approaching visitor, blowing nervously through his lips.

And then Hatfield saw that the person who had emerged from the wickiup was a Comanche squaw, incredibly old and wrinkled, her bony frame wrapped in a wool blanket. She held a Colt .45 in her hand.

Aware of the dizziness in his head, Hatfield called huskily, "Howdy. We needed water. All right?"

The ancient crone answered with an inarticulate grunt. She came closer to Hatfield, peering at him from under thorny white brows. Her hair was almost white, braided and tied with wisps of greasy red flannel.

The Indian woman circled Hatfield, then reached out a bony claw to touch the bullet wound on his neck.

"N'gu mglemlin," she muttered.

That must be Comanche jargon, Hatfield thought, but it was unintellible to him. It sounded friendly.

He tapped his gun holster, leveled his pointing figure like a gun and made a sound to indicate a shot, then touched his neck. The squaw nodded. The placement of the wound made it obvious that he had been drygulched.

She turned, gesturing toward the wickiup, then beckoning a crooked finger for him to follow her.

Hatfield whispered to Goldy, "She's friendly, feller. I figure she'll stake you out to feed, and unsaddle you."

Goldy followed the Ranger as he made his stumbling way behind the old Indian woman. Odors of wood smoke and jerky and garlic assailed his nostrils as the squaw lifted a flap of deerhide that parted as the door to her wickiup.

Hatfield stooped to enter the Indian dwelling. It was incredibly dark inside, but a bed of coals glowed pinkly in one corner. He could hear someone's steady breathing from the darkness. The squaw's husband, perhaps watching him. A thick medicinal odor was heavy in this hut.

The squaw's skeletal hand closed around the Lone Wolf's arm and guided him to the right. He stumbled on something and fell headlong on a soft and furry flooring, an animal skin of some kind. The medicine smell seemed to emanate from the hide.

HE WANTED to speak, to thank the squaw for her taking him into her home, but he could not make the effort to speak. He was vaguely aware of the

Comanche woman lighting a candle, but did not open his eyes. The squaw's horny fingers were infinitely gentle as they lifted the blood-soaked collar of his work shirt away from the bullet wound.

His senses were drifting off, but it was not another coma. This was what he needed—sleep. He felt as if he could sleep until Gabriel blew his horn. . . .

Daylight streaming through the open door of the wickiup revived Jim Hatfield. He sat up, conscious of a throbbing pain at the back of his neck. He lifted his hands, and discovered that the squaw had bandaged his wound. Some sort of Indian poulice formed a compress over the bullet-torn tissues.

He had slept the night through on an old buffalo robe. Sitting up, he was startled to realize that his head was clear,

and that his strength seemed almost normal again. Whatever the squaw used for medicine, it worked.

Through the entrance of the wickiup Hatfield could see the water hole, and Goldy cropping grama grass at the end of a rope. The old Indian woman was squatted before a lavarock *metate* a dozen yards from the, wickiup, grinding corn meal in the primitive manner of her ancestors. Her skull-like, brown-parchment face was vigilant, her roving eyes keeping guard on the roundabout terrain.

Hatfield ran a finger under his badge and sniffed the salve which the squaw had rubbed into his wound. It was the source of the medicinal tang his nostrils had detected last night.

A voice startled Hatfield from the far side of the hut.

"Smelly stuff, but works miracles. White Antelope concocts it from mescal pulp and chokeberry seeds. Old Indian recipe."

Hatfield twisted around, instinctively reaching for his guns. But the squaw had removed them while he slept, along with his boots and shirt.

Then he saw the speaker. A white man, lying on a pallet under the mud-and-wattle overhang of the wall. A very sick man, ghastly pale under layers of suntan and a week's scrub of whiskers. His hands were stroking the fringe of a Chihuahua blanket covering him, hands that held a tremor of weakness in them.

"White Antelope?" Hatfield repeated, holding back an impulse to ask this white man what he was doing here. "How come she's not living on a reservation?"

The sick man grinned wanly. "I doubt if any Indian agency knows she exists. Her brave and her papoose were killed by Mexicans at this spot, years ago. They're buried beyond the water hole. She's camped here twenty years that I know of, not wanting to leave their spirits' hunting ground."

It was a long speech, and it left the mysterious invalid panting and flushed. It was the speech of a man hungry to talk to another white man, Hatfield thought.

"How come you're on your back, amigo?" the Ranger asked.

The man stirred on his pallet. Suffering showed in the rutted lines of his face, in the abnormal brightness of his eyes. He was around twenty-five, Hatfield thought, and there was no way of knowing if his infirmity was due to disease or injury.

"Same reason you're here. I'm packing a slug in my carcass, so you're better off than I am, Ranger."

Hatfield's brows jerked. "You know I'm a star-toter?"

The man nodded. "White Antelope searched you last night. No, she isn't a thieving Injun. She had to identify you—before you came to."

The Lone Wolf sensed an obscure meaning in the man's words. He said, "For your sake, amigo?"

"You might put it that way, yes. That Texas Ranger star she dug out of your pocket—did you come by that badge legal, or bushwhack a Ranger to get it? White Antelope was wondering."

CHAPTER VI

Broken Arrow Treachery

WHOEVER this wounded man was, Hatfield decided, the fellow had his wits about him. He wasn't laying his cards on the table before a strange lawman without being sure of his ground. He had the defensive manner of a man on the dodge, but some deep-seated instinct told the Lone Wolf that this hombre was no renegade.

"If White Antelope found my tin star," he said, "you already know my name from my Ranger credentials."

The man nodded. "Jim Hatfield. But anyone could use that name. Would you mind answering one question for me?"

"Fire away. I'd like to ask you a few."

"If you are Jim Hatfield," came the feeble voice, "you can tell me the name of your training officer when you were a rookie—and where your Ranger barracks were located."

Hatfield said instantly, "Major Ben Travis—at Menard."

The wounded man relaxed his tension. "You pass." He grinned weakly. "Now—what brings you to Yucca Valley with a bullet nick on your hide?"

Hatfield decided to lay his own cards on the line. "I was fifteen miles north of the Broken Arrow Ranch at sundown yesterday when a bushwhacker creased me. I had to rely on my horse getting me out of range. When I rallied, my horse had carried me to this waterhole."

The man's lips pursed in a soundless whistle. "He carried you that fifteen miles and considerable more, Hatfield. We are on Broken Arrow range now. The extreme south end of it." The man paused for a moment, thoughtful, then went on, "Our stories match pretty much. I was ambushed, a week or so back. My horse lined out for the hills. I knew my only chance was to locate White Antelope's camp. I've known the old girl for years. I was afoot and raving crazy when she found me. I'd be long dead if she hadn't. As it is, she's going to pull me through."

"You work for Major Travis?"

"I've been his cavvy wrangler for going on five years, yes."

Hatfield said carefully, "Maybe you haven't heard, then. The Major died of a heart attack last week."

A derisive gleam kindled in the man's eyes. "Heart attack, hell! Old Ben was shot in the back. Not five miles from this very spot, Hatfield. Shot in cold blood by a pair of cattle rustlers. I ought to know. I was with Travis when it happened. I'm packing a slug from the same gun that killed old Ben."

Hatfield's heart was pounding. He was sure he knew who this man was. "You saw this murder?"

"Not exactly. The Major and I were out chousing the brush for strays. It was getting onto dark. I heard a shot. Rode over to where it came from and found Travis lying on the ground by his horse. He had a breath or two left in him—enough to tell me who had shot him. That's when the slug caught me, Hatfield. It was all I could do to make it back to the saddle and vamose."

Hatfield stood up, his head lowered to avoid striking the pole rafters supporting the tarp roof.

"Look," he said. "You don't seem to want to tell me your name—"

"In due time, maybe."

Hatfield drew in a deep breath. "Just taking a shot in the dark," he said, "I'm going to tell you who I think ambushed the Major. Jules Rondo. To avenge himself for being sent to the penitentiary, when the Major was a lawman himself."

The man nodded jerkily.

"You're half right, Hatfield. Rondo killed the Major, yes. But not to even up an old score. He had too good a thing of it on the Broken Arrow, rustling the old man blind. It was until just before that evening the Major and I were out in the brush that he'd caught Rondo, and a rider named Slim Westrip, altering the brand on a Broken Arrow yearling into

a Diamond Bar Diamond. The iron Rondo slapped on the beef his gang has been running into Mexico for years now. For a long time I'd suspected Rondo was stealing Broken Arrow beef, but the Major wouldn't believe it. He found out —in the last minute of his life. I'm sorry he did. Old Ben trusted Rondo. He trusted everyone."

HATFIELD knelt down beside the pallet. "Another shot in the dark," he said . "You are Judy Travis' fiancé—Bob Sherman."

The startled look in the man's eyes told Hatfield he was right.

"Yes—I am. But how could you know that? Do you know Judy? She's been away from Texas for over three years now—"

Hatfield started to speak, then held his tongue. He had to go easy here. Solved now was the puzzle as to why Rondo, instead of Sherman, had telegraphed Judy about the Major's death. But this man here, this Bob Sherman, was still dangerously weak. The shock of learning that Judy had been kidnapd off the train that was bringing her home for her father's funeral might be too much for him now.

"It's this way, Bob," Hatfield said gently. "The Major and I have corresponded some, during the years since we were together at Menard Ranger Barracks. He wrote me about Judy attending the university in Berkeley, and that she was planning to marry a fine young buckaroo named Bob Sherman when she graduated. After all you've told me this morning, I—"

Hatfield broke off as a shadow darkened the wickiup doorway. He turned and saw the withered old squaw coming in, an earthen bowl containing some steaming kind of soup cupped in her palms.

She regarded Jim Hatfield with satisfaction showing in her rheumy eyes. Then she set down the bowl and said something to Bob Sherman in the guttural patois of her native tongue.

"She says we both need nourishment," Sherman translated. "This gruel she stews up is like nothing you've ever tasted, Jim. It'll make you sit up and beg for more. She's been feeding it to me twice a day and I can't get enough of it. Ain't been able to keep anything else on my stomach since I landed here."

The squaw produced a watertight wicker basket into which she poured a generous portion of the spicy-scented soup. Not until he had taken his first sip of the concoction did Jim Hatfield realize how famished he was.

Sherman had to be spoon-fed, but the Indian crone administered to his wants as gently as a mother with a new babe.

Finishing his gruel, Hatfield said anxiously, "Look, Sherman. You say you've got a bullet in you. The nearest medico would be at Warbonnet, wouldn't he? You need a surgeon's care, and pronto."

The wounded man said something to White Antelope in her own tongue. The Indian woman wheeled around to face Hatfield, shaking her head violently.

"You don't understand, Hatfield," Sherman said. "I'm in no shape to travel to Warbonnet, and it would be fatal to bring a doctor out here. He'd report a gunshot victim to the sheriff, and—"

Hatfield cut in, "But you can't run the risk of internal hemorrhaging in this Indian shack, Bob. Anyhow, if Jules Rondo bushwhacked you and the Major, the sheriff ought to know about it."

White Antelope continued spooning the hot soup to Sherman. Between swallows he said, "I'm regaining my strength. But don't you see? Rondo's probably got his rustler crew combing the hills, hunting me. The third day I was here, they visited this wickiup, but white Antelope hid this pallet under a pile of faggots. Rondo's got to make sure I'm dead or his whole rustling set-up will be blown sky-high."

When Sherman had finally finished eating, the squaw placed her fingertips on his eyelids and muttered something to Hatfield.

"She wants you to go away and let me sleep, Ranger," Sherman said in a tired whisper. "Says I heal inside only when I'm sleeping. I think she slips some kind

of dope into my soup. I sleep twenty hours out of the twenty-four, seems like."

Hatfield grinned and nodded to the old squaw. "Tell her I savvy," he said. "But Sherman—before you doze off, can you give me a quick size-up of how things stand at the Broken Arrow?"

SHERMAN spoke at considerable length to the squaw, who finally nodded and shuffled out of the wickiup.

"She'll give us five minutes." Sherman grinned drowsily. "The set-up over at the ranch? It ain't good, Hatfield. Rondo's been getting rid of the Major's crew, one by one, for several years. He's replaced the men he fired with hardcases of his own."

"Didn't Major Travis realize that?"

Sherman's shoulders stirred listlessly. "The Major was too trusting. He was having trouble with rheumatism in his joints. More and more he was letting Jules Rondo run the spread. He knew he was being rustled blind, sure, but he thought it was Mexicans from below the Rio Grande, raiding his range. It was not until last week that he found out his own ramrod was blotting brands right here on the Broken Arrow."

Hatfield was silent for a moment. Then he said, "I'm fit to ride, hombre. I aim to take a pasear over to the Broken Arrow this afternoon and look around. Pretend I'm a grubline rider passing through. Is there anyone around the bunkhouse I can talk to?"

Sherman shook his head. "No one who wouldn't be spying for Jules. That's one reason he wanted to get rid of me, but he couldn't fire me, with me bein' engaged to marry the boss' daughter."

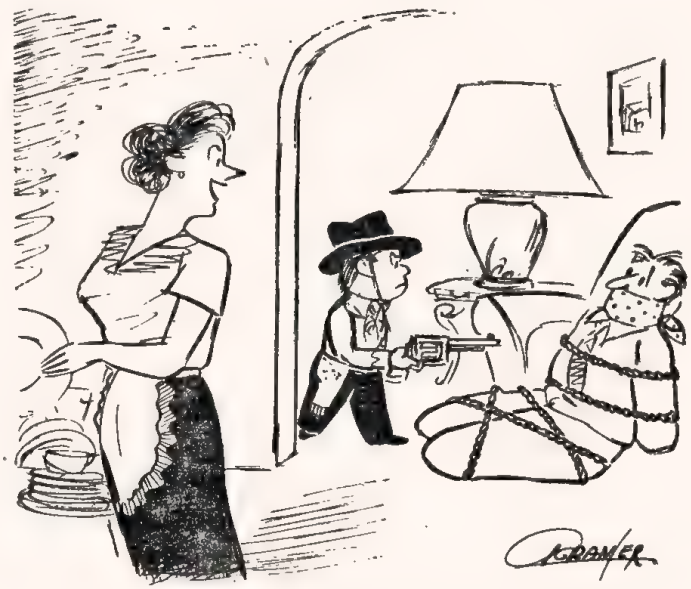
Whatever primitive sedative White Antelope had fed Bob Sherman was beginning to take effect. His eyes were closed now, his face completely relaxed. Further questioning was impossible. The young puncher's mind was beginning to get fuzzy.

Hatfield saw him rouse himself with an effort. "Ranger—don't go to ranch—headquarters. You'd be walking into a trap if you did. I'll take care of Rondo—when I'm in shape again. Let me—handle this."

The Ranger said, "Sure, kid, sure. You take it easy. You're in good hands here."

When he was sure Bob Sherman was asleep, Hatfield glanced around the wickiup and located his boots, chaps and gun harness. His stetson had been lost somewhere along his back trail.

"Oh, by the way, dear, I took Junior to his first movie today!"



White Antelope, he discovered, had laundered his shirt. Using some primitive form of home made soap, she had even succeeded in washing out the bloodstains on the collar and shoulder.

Putting the garment back on, Hatfield adjusted a bandanna around his throat, satisfied that the neckpiece would hide the lump of bandage at the back of his neck.

When he left the wickiup he was conscious of shaky knees, but otherwise ready to ride. Goldy wickered to him from the far side of the water hole.

White Antelope was squatting on her haunches beside the wickiup door, chewing a hunk of calfskin to soften the leather for a pair of moccasins she was making. Reaching in his pocket, Hatfield drew out a gold coin and dropped it on the ground at her feet.

"Mighty small payment for what you did for me last night," he said, wondering if she understood any English. "I come back, savvy? White man who sleeps inside is my good friend."

The squaw ignored the coin in the dust. She grunted something and went back to masticating the chunk of rawhide.

But her eyes were watching him intently as he went out to the grazing ground and led Goldy back to the water hole. She had not moved from where she squatted beside the wickiup door when he saddled up and mounted.

It occurred to him that he did not know how to reach the Broken Arrow Ranch from here. Riding over to the old squaw he dismounted and, with a mesquite twig drew a crude picture of a house, and a feathered arrow broken in the middle, to indicate the Major's brand. Then he pointed to the north, east, south and west.

WHITE ANTELOPE nodded. She pointed slightly north of west, holding up three fingers.

"Three miles to the Broken Arrow," Hatfield muttered. He pointed in the opposite direction, then to his horse, and made a sweeping circular gesture.

The squaw nodded emphatically, indicating that she understood. This white man who carried a Ranger badge would not leave a clear trail from this wickiup to the enemy.

He would approach the Broken Arrow from a different direction.

The sun was nooning when Hatfield rode off in the direction of the eastern mountains. A mile from the wickiup, he

swung north, and shortly crossed the tracks Goldy had made the night before when he had been insensible.

He rode on in a northerly direction for five more miles, emerging from the hilly area suddenly to find himself facing the Short Line narrow-gauge railroad tracks.

He turned west here, putting Goldy on the cross ties where no trail would show. He had followed the railroad another five miles before he came to a siding flanked by whitewashed cattle-loading chutes and corrals.

A weathered signboard pointed to a wagon road leading due south from the sidetrack, marked:

BROKEN ARROW RANCH, 2 Mi.

This, then, was where Judy Travis would have left the train, had she not been kidnaped by whoever had hammered open Duke Allred's handcuffs.

Duke Allred! The outlaw he had arrested in Mirage Junction seemed like someone he might have known in the remote past. The ways of fate were indeed strange. A telegram to Ranger headquarters in Austin from old Pop Huston had led him to Mirage Junction, and had put him on an entirely different case than the one to which he had been assigned. It had led him on a blind trail which had wound up at an Indian squaw's wickiup, and the bedside of Judy Travis' wounded fiancé.

CHAPTER VII

Jules Rondo

SPURRING Goldy into a jog-trot, Hatfield headed along the Broken Arrow wagon road. It passed through a fold in the hills, then revealed the broad flats of Yucca Valley, stretching southward toward the Mexican border.

A mile due south, Hatfield saw the neat buildings of Major Travis' ranch shimmering in the heat waves. A rambling California-style ranch house with adobe walls and a tiled roof; big barns and sheds; whitewashed corrals; haystacks; a pair of windmills, their vanes turning lazily in a sluggish breeze.

This was the prosperous cattle spread to which Ben Travis had retired in the prime of life, after a distinguished career as a Texas Ranger. Somewhere on this range, Travis had been shot down from ambush by a traitor whom Travis had given better than an even chance to redeem his misspent life.

Smoldering anger was building up in Hatfield as he kept Goldy at a steady lope, approaching the Broken Arrow. He rummaged in his chaps pocket to locate his Ranger star, see that it was well-hidden. When he arrived at the spread it would be as a drifter, not a lawman.

Riding in, Hatfield saw a group of punchers unloading red-painted boxes from a spring wagon and toting them into a shed for storage. In a remuda corral, other cowhands were breaking saddle stock.

The main entrance to the Broken Arrow was a massive rustic archway opening on a tamarisk-bordered lane which led to the main ranch house. No grubline rider would take that entrance. He would head for the barns first.

Men halted their work to stare curiously, but with no visible hostility, as Hatfield rode toward the wagon they were unloading. They were a gun-hung, ugly-looking lot, Hatfield thought, most of them probably wanted by the law elsewhere.

Reining up, Hatfield saw that the boxes they were unloading from the wagon carried stenciled labels:

HANDLE WITH CARE—DYNAMITE

He thought of the train being halted night before last in Gunsight Pass, and the fragment of dynamite-stick wrapper he had found in the debris of the rock slide.

"Looks like you boys are fixing to blow the lid off o' Texas," Hatfield drawled, grinning as he hipped around in saddle.

A lanky buckaroo wearing apron chaps and a gun at either hip walked over to lay a hand on Goldy's mane.

"We're fixin' to make an irrigation dam for an alfalfa pasture," he explained. "Prime-looking bronc you got here. Riding on through to the Border?"

It was a loaded question. Hatfield fished cigarette makings out of his chaps pocket and started twisting a smoke before he answered it.

"Yes and no. I'm looking for work. Understand a Major Travis runs this spread?"

The puncher's eyes narrowed. "Did, until a week ago. Old man kicked the bucket. You know Travis?"

Hatfield shook his head, wondering if this was Jules Rondo.

"No. Heard over in Warbonnet yesterday that a drifter might stand a chance of renting his rope here on the Broken Arrow. Thought I'd mosey over and brace Travis for a job. If he's dead, who would I see in his place?"

The cowhand said, "The foreman. But the best he can do for you is a bait of grub and a bunk for the night. We got a full crew."

Hatfield cemented his smoke with a lick of his tongue.

"Who'll be running the outfit, now that the boss is dead?" He tried to make the question sound off-hand.

"According to old man Travis' will, his foreman inherited the layout. Feller

name of Rondo. Jules Rondo. You'll find him over at the big house."

HATFIELD fired up his cigarette, acknowledged his thanks and dismounted to lead Goldy over to a brimming water tank at the foot of a windmill tower. The Broken Arrow waddies resumed their work unloading the cases of explosive, dismissing the grubline rider from their attention.

After letting the sorrel drink sparingly, Hatfield rode back to the tamarisk-bordered lane and in a few moments was tying up at the rack in front of the ranch house porch.

The Ranger thought, so that's the story Rondo is giving out to the world. Major Travis willed him the spread. But Rondo telegraphed the Major's daughter to rattle her hocks home for the funeral. You suppose the old man thought enough of Rondo to deed him the Broken Arrow and leave Judy out in the cold?

Remembering Ben Travis' gentle ways, Hatfield would not be surprised if Rondo was not actually in possession of the Broken Arrow, legally and above-board. Perhaps, he thought, that was what led to Rondo ambushing the old man. He might have known how the will was drawn up and got tired of waiting for Travis to die a natural death.

On his way across the front yard toward the ranch house, Hatfield thought of something else. On the train coming out from Mirage Junction, Judy had said *she* owned the Broken Arrow now. And her first move was going to be to fire Jules Rondo and make Bob Sherman her foreman.

The big redwood door of the ranch house swung open as Jim Hatfield was trailing his spurs up the front steps. He saw a tall, gray-haired man in his late forties standing there, a man wearing a marbled boss-type stetson, red-checkered shirt, and corduroy breeches stuffed into expensive shop-made boots.

A pair of staghorn-handled Colt .45s were holstered for cross draw at the man's flanks. His jutting jaw was overshadowed by a neatly-trimmed gray mustache. The eyes which regarded Hatfield were as gray as granite chips, not unfriendly, but holding a question between their narrowed lids.

"Howdy." Hatfield spoke first, dropping his cigarette and grinding the butt under heel. "Heard over in Warbonnet the other day that a grubliner might find a place to hang his hat here at the Broken Arrow. The name is Hayes—Jim Hayes. Maybe I'm the top hand you been looking for, sir."

The man in the doorway shook his head. "Sorry. No job open here. Spread has changed hands. Major Travis might have been hiring, I don't know. But he's dead."

Hatfield nodded. "So one of your boys told me, out at the water tank . . . Reckon you'll be the new owner, Jules Rondo?"

The rancher nodded, without offering to shake hands. "The same. Inherited Travis' iron. But I've got a full crew, Hayes."

A vein was hammering in Hatfield's temple. He stood within arm's reach of the ex-convict whom Major Travis had caught blotting a brand on a Broken Arrow calf. Perhaps one of those long-barreled revolvers hanging at Rondo's hip had been the weapon that had murdered Judy's father.

"Don't intend to turn a stranger away without a snack of grub, though," Rondo went on, not unkindly. "Cook's just dished up my bait. Be glad to have you join me. The crew's already finished eating."

Hatfield grinned. "Why, that's right obliging of you, Mr. Rondo."

RONDO stepped aside, motioning for his guest to enter. Hatfield stepped into the Broken Arrow house, vaguely making out the details of a large, Western-looking room in the semi-darkness—a massive fieldstone fireplace, rugs of Navajo design and animal pelts on the puncheon floor, mounted heads of big game on the walls.

"Fine set-up the Major had here," Hatfield commented, as Rondo closed the door

behind them, further darkening the gloom of this ranch house parlor. "You're a lucky man, Mr. Ron—"

Hatfield broke off, staring at a man who was seated on a horsehide-covered sofa in front of the fireplace.

That man was Duke Allred.

The omnious double click of a six-gun hammer coming to full cock behind him told Hatfield that Rondo had spotted the startled look of recognition which crossed Allred's face, as his erstwhile prisoner jumped to his feet, staring aghast.

"For a Ranger you said had your bullet in his brain," Rondo drawled icily, "this is a pretty healthy looking ghost, Allred."

The tinhorn came stumbling forward, his mouth working soundlessly. Hatfield's arms groped ceilingward as he felt Jules Rondo reach around behind him and deftly lift first one, then both of his Colts from leather.

"Rondo," Allred choked, "I would of sworn I tallied him on the noggin last night!"

Rondo laughed harshly. "Yeah. So you told me when you rode in. I was a fool to take your word for it, Allred."

In this moment of stark realization that he might be but a clock's tick away from death, Hatfield was not thinking of his own danger. The news that Duke Allred had been the ambusher who had waylaid him was final confirmation of why the train had been held up by a dynamite blast two nights ago.

"I'm beginning to get it, Rondo," Hatfield said. "It was you who kidnaped Judy Travis off the train night before last. It was you who blocked the tracks knowing Judy was aboard that coach, knowing she'd probably stay there while the men went to work clearing off the debris—"

He heard Rondo toss his guns onto a nearby chair.

"Mosey over to the sofa yonder, Hatfield," the Broken Arrow boss ordered tersely. "Allred, if you lied to me once, maybe you didn't give me the full facts as to why I found you wearing a Texas Ranger's handcuffs. I reckon the three of us have some talking to do."

With Rondo's cocked gun goading his spine, the Lone Wolf headed over toward the horsehide divan where Duke Allred had been sprawled out. Looking sideward at Allred, Hatfield saw pure terror building up in the tinhorn's face.

"I told you the truth, Rondo!" Allred said frantically. "I lifted fifty thousand in greenbacks off a mining outfit's paymaster up in Cherry Crick two months back. Jim Hatfield tracked me down at the Junction. You'll find he's packing better'n forty thousand of that dinero, along with a diamond pin worth another thousand—"

Hatfield rounded the end of the sofa and sat down without being ordered to. Rondo moved around with his back to the big fireplace, gesturing with his gun for Duke Allred to sit at the other end of the sofa from Hatfield.

"When I stopped the Short Line rattler the other night," Rondo said, "I had one purpose in mind—to keep Judy Travis from ever reaching the Broken Arrow. Her kidnaping would never have been traced to me, I had an unshakable alibi."

Hatfield folded his arms across his chest, enjoying the discomfiture on Duke Allred's face.

"I get the picture, Rondo," the Ranger said casually. "It ties in with a hunch I got after that bushwhacking. You stopped that train to grab Judy, not to help out Allred here."

Rondo nodded. "He was a witness I couldn't afford to leave behind. That's the only reason I knocked off his handcuffs. The fact that he was obviously an outlaw was the only thing that saved his life that night. That, and the deal he made me."

"A deal? Allred was in position to make a deal?"

THE FOREMAN said, "Allred knew you'd be sure to trail us, having a prime horse waiting in that boxcar. I decided to take that chance, seeing as how Allred claimed you were toting better than forty thousand dollars. I agreed to let

Allred use the Broken Arrow as a hide-out for a few weeks, in return for a fifty-fifty split of that dinero, if we could get our hands on it."

Hatfield turned to stare at Allred. "If you thought your shot had killed me last night," he challenged, "how did you convince Rondo you hadn't cached that money, Duke?'

Allred mopped his cheeks with a fancy silk neckscarf.

"Don't think I didn't try to catch up with your bronc, Hatfield. But the plug I was riding was no match for that stallion of yours. After it got dark I gave up the chase and came on to the ranch. Figured you were dead anyway, and Rondo and I could locate your carcass and recover that dinero—"

Jim Hatfield laughed softly.

"You would have drawn a blank, then. Your pay-roll loot and that diamond cravat pin were left in Pop Huston's safe at the Junction. He's shipped it by express to Ranger headquarters by now."

Allred wheezed, "He's lying, Jules! He's got that money!"

"Why don't you search me and find out, then?" Hatfield grinned derisively. "I'm not foolish enough to tote that much money."

That very grin of his was a challenge.

CHAPTER VIII

Death Sentence

FACE gray with fear as he saw Jules Rondo studying him, Allred slumped back on the sofa.

At last the Broken Arrow ramrod spoke to him, deliberately, coldly.

"I had you ticketed for a four-flusher the minute I spotted you chained to that railroad brake the other night, Allred," Rondo said. "Now Hatfield showing up at the Broken Arrow, apparently unharmed, is the worst possible thing that could have happened—for you. There's no question but what Hatfield and Judy Travis had a pow-wow together on that train—or before—though you denied that. This Ranger has come to the Broken Arrow hunting the girl. Haven't you, Hatfield?"

The Ranger hesitated. Then he asked, "Is Judy still alive, Rondo? Is she the only one who stands between you and the ownership of this spread?"

The sound of a door opening at the far end of the room stopped whatever Rondo's reply would have been. Glancing over his shoulder, Hatfield had a glimpse of a burly Mexican wearing a cook's white cap and apron moving in from the ranch house kitchen.

"Pablo," Jules Rondo said rapidly in Spanish, "take Señor Allred and this Rangero to the root cellar. They may prove useful to us, *sabe usted?*"

A rime of sweat burst out on Hatfield's pores. He had a fluent command of Spanish, but he knew that Duke Allred had not understood the foreman's words. Allred did not know that from the moment of Hatfield's entrance into this ranch house, he had been every bit as doomed as the Ranger.

"*Si*," the cook said. Wiping his hands on his apron he moved stolidly around the sofa to stand beside Rondo.

Allred was grinning. "You'll give me my chance to head for the Rio Grande, Rondo? That's all I'm asking of you now. The loan of a gun and a horse."

A malicious grin broke the fixture of Rondo's lips. He said softly, "You're not leaving the Broken Arrow, Duke. You know too much. More than any man in my crew except Slim Westrip."

Allred sagged back, for the first time beginning to comprehend that he was no better off than Jim Hatfield.

"Jules," he protested wildly, "you can't think I'd doublecross you! All I want is a chance to reach Mexico."

Rondo had holstered his gun, letting the Mexican cook take over. He said to Hatfield with a respect which had been lacking in his tone when he addressed Allred, "I've got to get you out of sight temporarily, Ranger. Pablo will take you

to the root cellar under the kitchen. Don't try to break for it and you'll be all right."

Hatfield came to his feet. "Can't you at least tell me if Judy is still alive?"

Rondo shrugged. "It wouldn't make any difference to you now, Ranger. You've forced my hand. I can truly say I'm sorry our trails had to cross."

Duke Allred was weeping now, weeping like a woman. He flung himself at the big foreman's feet, clinging to Rondo's pants legs, begging for his life with incoherent frenzy. Gone was the braggadocio, the swaggering vanity Allred had displayed at Pop Huston's place. He was reduced to gibbering hysteria now.

Rondo seized Allred's coat collar and hauled him to his feet, shoving him across the hearth where Pablo locked a heavy hand around his arm. Then the Mexican motioned to Hatfield with his gun muzzle, directing him toward the kitchen. Jules Rondo turned his back on the scene, head on chest.

Resistance would be futile. Hatfield had no doubt but what the Mexican cook would gut-shoot him without batting an eyelash, if Rondo gave the word. Rondo was playing a desperate game here on the Broken Arrow, and Jim realized now that the arrival of a Texas Ranger at his front door must have shaken Rondo to the core. Especially a Ranger whom Rondo knew had been a long-time friend of the rancher he had bushwhacked.

HATFIELD crossed the room, but Rondo remained beside the fireplace. When the Ranger entered the kitchen, Allred was at his heels, struggling impotently in the Mexican's grasp.

Pablo moved up fast, brushing the back of Hatfield's shirt with his gun muzzle. The Mexican was steering his two prisoners toward a back door in the kitchen, one set in a side wall. Reaching it, Pablo gave a guttural order for the two men to halt.

Then, letting go of Allred's arm, Pablo produced a big iron key from his apron pocket and unlocked the heavy slab door. When he opened it, a flight of steps leading down into the Stygian darkness of a rock-walled root cellar was revealed.

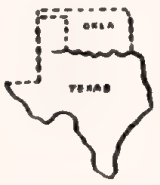
This subterranean room under the Broken Arrow ranch house was to be Rondo's prison for him and Allred. Without hesitation, the Ranger started down the steps into the dank gloom. Any tarrying would be suicidal now.

He had reached the stone floor at the foot of the steps when he heard the sodden, meaty impact of a fist striking Duke Allred. Hatfield jumped aside just in time to escape being struck by the tinhorn's cartwheeling body. Pablo had knocked the man headlong down the steep steps.

Allred's skull hit the stone floor with a sickening thump. He rolled limply and lay still, his eyes glazed.

A TALL TEXAS TALE

What Price Time?



TRAVELING through Texas years ago in my faithful Lizzy I come across a gangling six-foot-plus farmer who was holding a pig tied to a pole up among the branches of an acorn tree. The pig would eat what was within range, then the farmer would move the pole to where there was another cluster of acorns.

"That sure is a peculiar way to feed a pig," I observed. "Why don't you shake the tree and let the pig pick 'em up?"

"Thar ain't nothin' wrong with the way I'm adoin' hit, stranger," grunted the man.

"But you lose so much time this way," I ventured.

"Time?" remarked the big fellow, holding the pole with one hand and scratching his head with the other. "What's time to a hawg?"

—Al Spong

The big Mexican slammed the cellar door. Hatfield heard the click of the padlock in its iron hasp on the kitchen door jamb.

A felty, smothering darkness closed in, a tangible pressure pushing against Hatfield's flesh. The cellar was filled with the cloying, musty smell of potatoes and onions and moldy burlap. He had little doubt but that it had but one exit—that eight-inch-thick hardwood door at the top of the stairs.

Hatfield explored his pockets and found a block of California matches. He thumbed one aflame with his nail and was bending down to find out if Allred was dead or alive when a voice spoke from further back in the cellar:

"Mr. Hatfield! Oh, he got you, too!"

The Lone Wolf wheeled around, letting the thin light of the match penetrate the shadows. Facing him not ten feet away, her body pressed back against a tier of sacked potatoes, stood Judy Travis.

The match sputtered out between Hatfield's fingers as he sprang forward. The next moment the girl was in his arms, trembling like a wounded animal.

"Judy, you're all right? You're not harmed?"

Her voice came in a choked whisper, "No—no. But when Jules left that awful Duke Allred behind on the trail, to dry-gulch you, they told me you were dead and—"

Hatfield's mind held a picture of the interior of the cellar as he had seen it in the matchlight. There was a large packing box over to the left somewhere. He groped for it now with his foot, guiding the girl over to it. Sitting down beside her, he held her close.

He had a mental image of her chalk-white face, her glosy golden hair in disarray, her tweed traveling suit smudged and disheveled. But finding her alive, even if a prisoner on her own ranch, was something he had not dared hope for.

"Judy," he said earnestly, "I've found out a few things since Allred tried his bushwhack yesterday. The waddy you aim to marry—"

She broke out hysterically, "I know, I know about Bob! I know why he didn't telegraph me about Dad. Ronda's holding him as hostage, to force me—"

"Wait!" Hatfield cut in, shaking the girl's shoulders gently. "Rondo told you he's keeping Sherman prisoner?"

"Yes. Because Rondo's got his heart set on taking over the Broken Arrow! He can't do that if I don't sign over the papers in his name. He's given me until sundown to do that, or he'll kill Bob and me, too!"

THE RANGER knelt before her, lighting another match. Cupping Judy's chin in his left hand, he forced her to look at him, knowing that she was close to losing her mind.

"Listen to me, Judy. Bob's no prisoner of Rondo's. He's free. I was talking to him only a few hours ago."

Comprehension was slow to replace the terror in Judy's eyes. She clung to him, her lips moving soundlessly as she repeated his words.

"Your fiancé is in safe hands, Judy," Hatfield went on, and lowering his voice to a whisper, not knowing whether they were being eavesdropped upon, he gave her a quick run-down of his discovery of Bob Sherman at the Comanche Squaw, White Antelope's, wickiup over in the eastern hills.

When he had finished, Judy asked in a steadier voice, "You say he's wounded? With only an old Indian woman to nurse him?"

Hatfield said earnestly, "He's wounded, but he's making a fine recovery. White Antelope mixes good medicine, Judy. Take my word for that. The important thing is that Rondo is trying to run a bluff on you."

Judy Travis choked back a sob. "I thought maybe he was lying," she said. "That's why I refused to put my name on all the papers he had ready for me, drawn up by some crooked lawyer over in Warbonnet. Only I thought Bob was already dead. That's why I told Jules I

wouldn't sign until I saw Bob Sherman with my own eyes."

Across the darkness, Hatfield could hear Duke Allred beginning to stir, his breathing coming raspily to their ears.

"Rondo has no idea whether Bob is dead or alive," Hatfield said hurriedly. "The man must be desperate, knowing Sherman got away. Judy—you know your father didn't die of a heart attack, don't you?"

He felt her hands stiffen under his.

"I never did believe that. Do you know —the truth?"

Hatfield broke the news as gently as he could, recounting Bob Sherman's version of the old ranchman's murder.

"It all ties together," he concluded. "Rondo waited several days, trying to track down Sherman, most likely, before he got desperate and sent you that telegram, calling you home. He knew the Major wrote you frequently."

"Yes," Judy said, in a dead voice. "Twice a week."

Hatfield went on, "When his mail suddely stopped coming, you'd think something was wrong, and probably catch the first train for Texas. Rondo knew that. So he decided to gamble. He wired you, and you wired back that you'd be arriving on yesterday's Short Line. But Rondo couldn't trust the renegades he's hired to run the spread. He didn't want the crew to see your arrival here, with them knowing he'd murdered your father. That's why he kidnaped you off the train. No one could ever prove what had happened to you. The way it looked to outsiders, you had helped Duke Allred escape custody, and the two of you had run off together."

Allred was stirring now. He was beginning to groan and give other indications of returning to consciousness.

"I suppose," Hatfield said, "it's useless trying to escape from this cellar?"

"Yes," Judy said. "The walls are two feet thick. And soundproof. Even if Dad's old crew—all my old bunkhouse friends of years ago—even if they were still on the ranch, they'd have no way of knowing we're trapped down here."

Hatfield stood up and began pacing the open area of the cellar floor, trying to figure things out.

HE FINALLY said, "I'm pretty certain that Rondo will be coming for Allred and me as soon as it gets dark. He'll want to dispose of us without his crew's knowledge, too. But you'll have to keep playing your cards the way they lay, Judy. You know where Bob Sherman is. Rondo doesn't. You've got to keep stalling Rondo off, where deeding the ranch over to him is concerned. Tell him you sign when he produces Sherman—and not before."

The girl pulled in a long breath. "That's what I'd planned to do. But I'm already at the limit of my endurance. He could starve me—torture me. I might reach a point where I'd be out of my senses."

Hatfield was silent. There was no answer to that.

"And even if I did sign his documents," Judy pointed out, "what then? Do you think Jules would dare set me free, to report him to the law? Of course not."

Hatfield fought against growing despair. Any way he looked at this thing, he butted up against a solid wall of defeat. Rondo held all the aces in the deck.

Except one. The fact that Bob Sherman was still alive was the weak link in Rondo's chain. As long as Sherman's whereabouts were unknown to the Broken Arrow foreman, his grip on the Travis ranch was insecure.

Rondo had already searched White Antelope's wickiup on the off chance that the missing wrangler might have sought shelter there, and had failed to locate the injured man. It was doubtful if the ramrod would revisit the squaw's camp.

Eventually, Sherman would be well enough to ride again. But that day was weeks, perhaps months away. Without a doctor's care, Sherman might not pull through. But even if he recovered, it would not be in time to save Judy Travis.

Hatfield was a realist, where his own chances were concerned. The train con-

ductor's message to his superior, Captain Bill McDowell, would give the Ranger organization a general idea of what part of Texas held the clue to his disappearance. But McDowell would not organize a manhunt until his ace ranger had been unreported for a week or more, somewhere "west of Mirage."

CHAPTER IX

Rondo's Ultimatum

MOANING, whimpering, Duke Allred's voice broke through Hatfield's thoughts.

"We've—only got one chance, Hatfield. Only one chance."

The Ranger said harshly, "That's one more chance than I see in the cards for us, Duke. What is it?"

Allred was crawling across the stone floor toward the Lone Wolf now.

"That Colorado money! Dinero talks with Rondo. You didn't really send it back to Austin, did you, Hatfield? It's still in Huston's safe at the Junction, ain't it?"

Hatfield laughed harshly as he blasted Allred's hopes.

"No dice, Duke. Your loot's on the way to headquarters by now. I left instructions for it to be held as evidence against you, in case we couldn't make that Warbonnet killing stick. That ought to be a comfort to you, Allred. Maybe you won't have to stretch rope for gunning down that deputy sheriff."

A rattling noise at the top of the stairs cut off whatever Allred was about to say. Daylight suddenly streamed into the cellar as the kitchen door opened and tall Jules Rondo appeared there, with Pablo in the background.

The Broken Arrow foreman came halfway down the stairs and sat down on a step, staring at Judy and his two men prisoners. Allred, his face streaked with blood, began to drag himself toward the steps, babbling piteously.

"Pipe down, will you?" Rondo demanded testily. "What I have to say is for Judy." He lifted his eyes to stare at the Major's daughter, sitting on the packing case beside Jim Hatfield. "Judy," he said, "you've had time to make up your mind. You haven't much choice. The ranch in return for your life. Is that such a high price?"

Judy's mouth hardened. "I told you my answer, Jules," she said in a steady voice. "Bring Bob Sherman here, unharmed, and I'll sign over Dad's ranch to you."

Rondo rubbed the back of his hand across his mustache.

"I'll deliver your sweetheart," he said, "when your signature is on a quit-claim deed. Showing that I paid for this ranch."

Judy shook her head. "Then it's no deal. You've killed Bob. That's why you can't produce him."

A baffled expression crept into Rondo's eyes.

"Look, Judy," he said. "This Ranger here. I have no grudge against Jim Hatfield. If he gave me his word of honor not to press charges against me, I'd be willing to turn him loose. You wouldn't want the life of your father's old friend on your conscience, would you?"

When Judy hesitated, Hatfield spoke up. "That proposition is too ridiculous even to talk over, Rondo, and you know it. I don't count. I know when I'm finished."

Rondo's face flushed. "I can always forge Judy's name to those papers," he reminded Hatfield. "The ranch is as good as mine. I just don't want to handle it that way, against a young woman."

Hatfield smiled grimly. "Sure," he said. "You could rig up papers that might pass muster at the county seat. But folks would wonder how Judy Travis was able to sign away her heritage—after she'd been kidnaped off a railroad car. Judy would never be seen alive again. How would you manage that angle, Rondo?"

Rondo gestured toward Duke Allred. "Why, didn't Judy leave the train with this stranger? Who can say what Allred

might have meant to Judy? Perhaps they were lovers, skipping the country."

Hatfield interjected drily, "Who would believe they would drop by this ranch and sign it over to you, Rondo?"

RONDO stood up. "My papers would show that I paid a handsome price for this spread, Hatfield. I'm not such a fool that I haven't foreseen public skepticism. But my tracks are covered. The law could never prove that Judy didn't sell out to get money so she and her lover could escape from Texas. The law can never be sure how Travis actually died. All the loop-holes are plugged Hatfield."

Judy said in a low voice, "Then we're checkmated. I won't sign anything until I have Bob beside me. I'd die first."

Hatfield said, "If Sherman is your hold over Judy, Rondo, why don't you produce him? Because he's already dead? You had to get Sherman out of the way, to make your deal stick."

Rondo climbed slowly back to the kitchen level. Turning, he answered the Lone Wolf:

"I'm depending on you to make the girl come to her senses and accept my terms, Ranger. I will be back in a few hours. When I come, it will be to take you and Allred over to my private boot hill, to join Major Travis. You seem to be sure Sherman is dead, that I'm bluffing about him. Well—maybe I am . . ."

Moon-drenched night lay over the Yucca Valley cattle range Lights glowed in the Broken Arrow cookhouse and messhall, where Rondo's crew of hand-picked rustlers were finishing supper.

Old Pablo Rodriguez, who had replaced Major Travis' Chinese chef at the main house three years ago when old Foo Chee Wung had fallen victim to pneumonia, made his way over to the cookshack and sought out Slim Westrip, a big renegade who had shared Rondo's penitentiary cell in the old days.

Bending over Westrip's shoulder, Pablo whispered, "Boss wants to see you pronto prontico, Sleem."

Westrip unstraddled himself from the bench and followed Pablo out of the messhall. With Rondo taking over the spread, Westrip was in line for the foreman's job.

It had been Slim Westrip who had broken the news of Major Ben Travis' death to the rest of the Broken Arrow crew, two weeks ago. According to Westrip, he and Rondo had been combing the brush for strays out in the east hills when they had discovered the old Major's body, badly mutilated by coyotes and buzzards. A bullet-hole in the back of his skull.

"Drygulched by rustlers, most likely," Westrip had told the crew. "We buried him where we found him. Rondo's telegraphed the news to Miss Judy over in California. He's going to offer to buy her out."

The crew had asked no questions. Having been hired to rustle Broken Arrow stock, they might put two and two together and decide that the drygulchers were Rondo and Westrip, but it wasn't any business of theirs. So far as they knew, the Major's daughter hadn't returned to Broken Arrow. That also was no business of theirs.

Westrip found Jules Rondo finishing his evening meal in Major Travis' private dining room. For several years prior to the boss's death, his foreman had lived in the main house.

"Girl come to terms, Boss?" Westrip greeted Rondo. Dragging up a chair he poured himself a cup of coffee.

Rondo shook his head. "Not yet. She's holding out for proof that Sherman is still alive." Rondo scowled. "I can't figure out," he said, "how you could have missed knocking Sherman off, at that short range."

Westrip shrugged. "I had my gunsights dead center on his backbone, as he was kneeling there beside the boss. Are you forgetting that your slug didn't finish the Major off, Jules? We know he lived long enough to tell Sherman about catching us slapping that iron on a Broken Arrow heifer."

Rondo scowled angrily. "No use hashing over our mistakes. What matters is that Sherman got away before we could

get to our horses. Slim, I'd give my bottom dollar to know if that kid got away clean"

EYING Rondo over the rim of his coffee cup, Westrip said easily, "Stop worrying, Boss. We'll find Sherman's bones out in them hills somewheres, sooner or later. Only reason he got away was because dark caught us and that sandstorm blotted out his sign. But he never made it out of the valley alive. I'll stake my last blue chip on that. His saddle horse come back, didn't he?"

Rondo got to his feet and hitched up his gunbelts.

"Time to take Hatfield and Duke on their little pasear, Slim. The boys ask any questions about what became of that stranger who drifted in on the sorrel?"

Westrip grinned. "They figured him for a drifter. No way for them to find out I put his bronc in the Major's private stable. They didn't give him a second thought."

"*Bueno.* Pablo will let you into the cellar. Hogtie 'em before you bring 'em out. Especially Hatfield. He's dangerous."

Westrip made his way into the kitchen. Rondo paced the dining room, nervous and keyed-up. Things were not going according to plan. Rondo hadn't counted on Judy's stubborn streak. She had inherited her father's iron will. Nothing short of physical torture could break her spirit, and Rondo knew that now. Well, if it came to that—

Spurs jangled from the kitchen doorway and Slim Westrip appeared in the dining room.

"Boss," the renegade said, "there's something I want to show you. Bullet wound on that Ranger's neck. Allred wasn't lying when he said he'd tallied Hatfield, after all."

Rondo said impatiently, "What do I care if Hatfield was nicked by a slug? I don't want to face the man again. He has a way of looking straight through you and making you feel he's twice the man you are. Get him out of here."

Westrip stood his ground. "I want you to look at the bandage on Hatfield's neck, Boss. I got a hunch it means something."

Puzzled, Jules Rondo followed his segundo into the kitchen. Pablo Rodriguez was standing guard over Jim Hatfield and the sniveling Duke Allred, both prisoners with their arms securely roped behind their backs.

Neither of the doomed men spoke as Rondo walked over to them. Westrip stepped around behind Hatfield and pulled up the Ranger's bandanna neckpiece, to reveal a lumpy poultice held in place by a strip of faded cloth.

"Poultic of chokeberry seeds and cactus pulp, Boss," Westrip said. "I smelled that medicine the minute I went down into the cellar. You know what that means?"

Rondo shook his head. But he was interested. He had seen the tautness come to Hatfield's lips, the panic in the Ranger's eyes.

"Chokeberry seeds and cactus squeezings is an old Comanche Injun remedy, Boss," Westrip said. "Allred creased Hatfield's neck with a slug, most likely. Somebody doctored him. Using Injun medicine. There's only one Injun in this part of Yucca Valley that I know of."

A pulse started throbbing on Rondo's temple. "The old squaw over in the east sandhills. White What's-her-name—squats by that water hole?"

Westrip said, "White Antelope. She's doctored more'n one gunshot wound in her time. I'm just wondering, Boss. Bob Sherman's known that squaw since he was a button. He was bad wounded that night he got away. You suppose—"

Rondo said in a growling monotone, "But we searched her camp, couple days after Sherman's horse showed up at the barn."

"A purty skimpy search, when you think back on it, Boss. That old Comanche is foxy. She could of dragged Sherman out in the brush and hid him."

Rondo tongued his cheek thoughtfully. Westrip went on, "It's just a hunch. Hatfield won't say where he got this poultice. But it might be worth checking up on.

White Antelope might be riding herd on Sherman, doctoring him like I'll bet she doctored this Ranger."

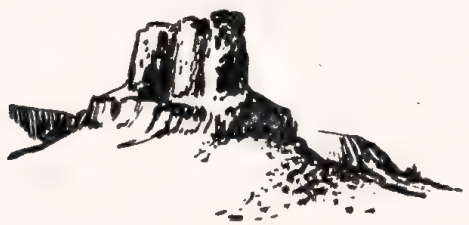
RONDO seemed to have come to a decision. He turned to Pablo. "You ride out with Slim tonight," he ordered the cook in Spanish. "Dead Man's Gulch is on the way out to that Injun squaw's camp anyhow. Have a prowl around that wickiup of hers. If she won't let you look around, gun the old mummy down."

Pablo nodded. "*Si. Es seguro,* Jules."

Westrip drew a gun from leather and took Hatfield by the arm. Pablo followed with Duke Allred. The four men vanished into the night, headed for the Major's private barn in the rear of the ranch house grounds.

Duke Allred was moving like a man in a nightmare, too emotionally spent to beg for mercy. Jim Hatfield, though he betrayed no concern, was in mental anguish as abysmal as Allred's, but for quite a different reason.

With his arms trussed behind his back, and Jules Rondo in possession of his guns, Hatfield knew the chances of making a



break tonight were slim indeed. But his own impending fate was forgotten in the light of what had transpired in the kitchen a few minutes ago.

Westrip was making a wild guess, linking Bob Sherman's whereabouts with old White Antelope. It had been a sharp deduction, figuring out where Hatfield had been doctored up the night before.

Now, the only thing that stood between Bob Sherman and death was the ancient squaw who guarded his shelter. And White Antelope probably would never feel the bullet Pablo would put into her brain. The Mexican renegade would dispose of the squaw before searching the wickiup tonight!

CHAPTER X

At Dead Man's Gulch

PABLO stood guard over the two prisoners while Westrip went inside, emerging shortly with three saddle horses, one of them Hatfield's sorrel, Goldy. The stallion caught the Ranger's scent in the darkness and whickered plaintively.

Westrip growled an order, "Rope them prisoners aboard the Ranger's bronc, Pablo. Tie their ankles together. They'll ride double as far as the Gulch."

Duke Allred had to be lifted bodily into Goldy's saddle. Hatfield mounted behind the cantle, offering no resistance as Pablo knotted his boots together under Goldy's belly with a rawhide thong.

When Duke Allred had been similarly tied, and roped to the saddle-horn as an added precaution, Slim Westrip picked up the trail rope leading from Goldy's bridle. Climbing aboard his own mount, he dallied the rope around his saddle-horn.

Seeing this by starlight, Jim Hatfield knew there would be no hope of spurring Goldy away from their captors and outrunning pursuit during tonight's ride to Dead Man's Gulch.

Westrip led the double-mounted sorrel down the tree-bordered lane and out under the Broken Arrow's rustic gateway. Pablo brought up the rear, starshine glinting off a Winchester barrel balanced across his pommel. The rifle, the Ranger thought, shuddering, that would blast the helpless Bob Sherman into eternity before this night was much older.

They headed toward the rimming sand hills. Over in the folds of those rolling uplands, Bob Sherman probably was asleep on his pallet now. The old Comanche squaw might be on guard, but she would be as helpless as the wounded waddy against an ambush bullet.

The memory of his recent parting with Judy Travis was heavy on Hatfield's mind. She had clung to him desperately,

kissing him, before Westrip had finished knotting the bonds behind his back. She had been certain she would never see her father's old Ranger friend again. She realized equally well that she, too, faced an ordeal, possibly physical torture, at Jules Rondo's hands. But even at the last, her courage had shown no sign of wavering.

Two miles across the sage flats, and Westrip led the way into the chapparal which mottled the slopes of the low hills. Now they were heading more in the direction of Bob Sherman's hideout.

An eroded gully, the entrance thick with mesquite and smoketree scrub, loomed up in the starlight. Into the gully mouth Westrip crowded his horse, with Goldy following, but Duke Allred's body shielded Hatfield from the savage backlash of the thickets as Westrip passed through them. They must have whipped at Pablo Rodriguez, though, for the Mexican was cursing a steady stream in Spanish as he followed them into the gulch.

A hundred yards further in the cutbanks fell away. A sandy-floored amphitheater was revealed, and in the middle of it Hatfield saw the ashes of an old branding fire.

Slim Westrip broke the silence he had held since they had left the ranch.

"This," he announced, "is where Ben Travis reached the end of his rope. That's why Rondo calls it Dead Man's Gulch." He was chuckling as he swung down from stirrups. "After tonight, reckon it'll be Dead Men's Gulch. This is the private boot hill Rondo was talking about."

Pablo came up alongside Goldy's stirrups and untied the prisoners' feet, but not their arms. The Mexican was taking no chances with Allred and Hatfield. As they slid to the ground, Pablo backed away and levered a shell into the breech of the Winchester.

THE Broken Arrow segundo was untying a pair of short-handled manure shovels from his saddle. The significance of those tools brough a moan of sheer terror from Duke Allred.

"You're going to dig your own graves, boys," Westrip said. "Pablo, you run along and tend to your chores. Reckon you know where the old squaw's hogan is from here, don't you? Not more'n half a mile south of the end of this gully."

Hatfield felt overpowering despair as he saw the Mexican *cociñero* climb back aboard his pony, shoving his .30-30 into the saddle scabbard.

"*Si*. S'eem," Pablo answered, spurring forward. "You want me to breeng back Bob Sherman to these *cemeterio?*"

Westrip tossed the shovels out on the flat ground.

"I got my doubts if you'll run into that rannihan, Pablo. The boss don't want him brought back to the spread if you do find him does he?"

"No."

"Then if you're lucky enough to find him, leave him where you drop him. If he's hiding in the Injun's shack, set fire to it. *Noches.*"

Pablo cuffed back his big sombrero and clapped spurs to his horse's flanks. In moments he had vanished into the shadows where the defile cutbanks pinched together at the far end of the clearing.

Duke Allred had fallen flat on the ground, his body wracked with sobs. Westrip regarded the tinhorn sneeringly, then said to Hatfield:

"You'll have to dig the hole for both of you, I reckon. That yeller-belly will faint away cold before this is over."

He came over behind the Lone Wolf and fumbled with the knotted ropes which bound Hatfield's wrists together. But the moment the ropes fell free, he jumped away from the prisoner, yanking a sixgun from holster.

"'*Sta bueno*—start digging!" he ordered. "Rondo don't want to leave you above ground for the buzzards to draw attention to. Nobody'd miss this Allred sidewinder, but a Texas Ranger is something else again."

Hatfield picked up one of the shovels and began to dig. He worked as rapidly as possible, on the off chance that the gunshots Westrip meant to fire shortly

might carry to the ears of Bob Sherman and the old Comanche woman and warn them of Pablo's approach.

It was easy to dig into the heavy sand. Inside of fifteen minutes, Hatfield had the general outline of a grave excavated and was shoveling it to knee-depth. Westrip would not insist on a deep grave. He would probably tarry here only long enough to cover the mound with rocks to prevent coyotes from digging here. A similar oblong of loose stone lay in the moonlight a few yards away, near the north cutbank of the gulch. That cairn, Hatfield was sure, marked old Ben Travis' last resting place.

The outlaw stood a few feet away, smoking a cigarette. His attention was divided between the Ranger in the half-dug grave and Duke Allred, sprawled on his face over by the waiting horses.

Allred had ceased whimpering. He was completely motionless. The man's cowardice was in his favor, right now. He had probably lost consciousness out of sheer horror.

"All right, Hatfield!" Westrip said suddenly. "That's deep enough. Lug Allred's carcass over. Damned if I'm not tempted to bury him alive, the damned sniffling baby!"

Jim Hatfield climbed out of the shallow hole, both hands knotted tightly around the hickory shovel handle. This was all he had in the form of a weapon—but no chance to use even that, for Westrip was playing it cagey, out of reach.

HEADING over toward the prostrate Allard on the sand, Hatfield was bid-

"You don't have to keep looking around. You'll know it if I fall off!"

ing his time, watching for a sudden charge at Westrip.

The outlaw said sharply, "I know what you're thinking, Ranger! Drop that shovel! Right where you're standing."

Taut-lipped, Hatfield tossed the shovel aside and moved on toward Allred. Stooping over the inert body, he reached down to get his hands under the tinhorn's armpits. Allred's dead weight was hard to handle. The effort of lifting him brought a stab of pain to the fresh bullet wound on Hatfield's neck.

Carrying Allred's body, Hatfield started

toward the open grave. Westrip moved in closer, thumb on gun-hammer, his cigarette tossed to one side.

Hatfield was veering away from the shovel he had dropped on the ground when Duke Allred suddenly came alive with a scream which echoed ghoulishly from the gully walls. He broke free of Hatfield and began to run, sprinting for the opening onto the clearing. Plainly he had been shamming unconsciousness.

Westrip wheeled around, flame stabbing from his gun-muzzle.

As Jim Hatfield scooped up the shovel he saw Allred stumble, knocked off his feet by the ripping impact of Westrip's slug in his back.

Through pluming gunsmoke, the Ranger launched the shovel at Westrip like a javelin. Westrip was wheeling in a crouch, his .45 thundering, when the hard-flung shovel blade caught him in the temple. Blood spurted as Westrip reeled backwards, loosing his footing.

Running in fast, half-crouched, Hatfield made his desperate bid to follow through with his momentary advantage. His hand closed over the barrel of Westrip's gun, even as the fallen outlaw jerked trigger. Powder grains stung the Ranger's cheek as the air-whip of the point-blank bullet fanned his face like the slap of an open hand.

Hatfield's churning legs carried him over Westrip's body, his savage jerk pulling the hot-barreled Colt from the segundo's grasp. Recovering his balance, Hatfield reversed the gun in his hand and spun about to face Westrip.

Just in time! For the outlaw was digging a second gun from holster. Now this had become a matter of kill or be killed. There was no time to give Slim Westrip a chance to surrender.

Hatfield's finger compressed on the hair-trigger. He felt the heavy gun buck against the crotch of his thumb. The bullet traveled less than two feet, smashing Westrip dead center of the forehead and tearing a ghastly hole from the back of his skull.

It was finished. Incredibly, Hatfield was free. He had played out this hand with the bad cards luck had dealt him, but it would be Westrip who would occupy that yawning hole Hatfield had been digging—not the Lone Wolf.

Lurching forward, Hatfield pried the revolver from Westrip's dead hand. Without losing motion, he headed on toward the horses. Westrip's big steeldust gelding, panicked by the blast of gunshots, was just vanishing down the gulch, empty stirrups flapping.

The Ranger's whistle brought Goldy trotting forward, trumpeting nervously. Hatfield paused, straddling Duke Allred's sprawled body for a brief moment, satisfying himself that Westrip's hasty aim at the fleeing prisoner had gone true. It had. Duke Allred was dead, beyond the reach of Ranger law.

Vaulting into saddle then, Jim Hatfield spurred Goldy across the clearing, past the two dead men and the open grave. Only one thing was in his mind now. Pablo Rodriguez had had more than enough time to reach Bob Sherman's hiding place!

Even as the galloping sorrel carried him out of the gulch and he was reining toward the Comanche's water hole, the night breeze carried to Hatfield's ears a sudden volley of gunfire, followed by an ominous silence.

Was he already too late? Would he reach White Antelope's wickiup only to find it in flames, a funeral pier for Bob Sherman and the red-skinned old woman who had befriended him?

CHAPTER XI

Makings of Disaster

KEEPING Goldy at a hard run, Hatfield figured he had cut the distance to the water hole in half when he caught sight of a rider hammering along a moonlit ridge to his right. A serape bannered from the rider's shoulder.

That much Hatfield saw before an intervening ridge cut off his view.

"Must have been Pablo," he panted, reining Goldy to a halt. "Headed back to report to Westrip."

Indecision gripped the Ranger. When Pablo got back to Rondo's boot hill in Dead Man's Gulch, he would find two bodies and an empty grave. He would know then that Hatfield had somehow managed to escape.

That would leave the Mexican cook with two alternatives. He could either head for the Broken Arrow to inform Jules Rondo that his plans had misfired, or he could swing back south to stalk the missing Ranger.

Hatfield had a bad moment, trying to make up his mind. If Pablo decided to return to the ranch, he would have too great a head start for Hatfield to hope to overtake him. If the Mexican chose to try and avenge Westrip's killing—

Anxiety over what had happened at White Antelope's wickiup finally sent Hatfield on in the direction of the water hole. That burst of gunshots had meant something. One had sounded like Pablo's Winchester; the other had the sharper, flatter barks of a sixgun such as the one the squaw owned.

Pablo's arrival at the wickiup then, had not been a surprise. Old White Antelope had managed to fire a couple of shots. She had obviously missed her target, assuming that the night rider Hatfield had seen was Pablo. But if the Mexican had tallied the squaw, he had likewise murdered the helpless Bob Sherman. He would probably have found Sherman in a drugged torpor inside the wickiup.

Hatfield was in sight of the moon-gilded water hole now, and the ocotillo-and-mud-wattled wickiup that clung to the slope beyond it like a mud-dauber's nest. Momentary relief went through him, seeing that the shack was not in flames.

Aware that he could be a target himself if the Comanche woman had succeeded in scaring off Pablo, Hatfield spurred over to put the willow thicket between the wickiup and himself. He yelled into the night.

"White Antelope—Bob! You in there?"

His call reverberated in echo from the hillsides. No sound came from the wickiup or surrounding area.

Obsessed by a feeling that death had beaten him to this rendezvous, the Lone Wolf ground-hitched Goldy behind the willowbrake. He made his way across the moonlit clearing toward the wickiup, calling to the squaw in a loud voice as he approached.

The odor of gunsmoke still hung in the stagnant air in this hill pocket. Nearing the wickiup, Hatfield halted, keeping the silence of the night for any sound that would betray that Pablo was riding this way. He heard nothing.

Reaching the door of the wickiup he lifted the deerhide flap and peered into the curdled blackness of the shack, calling Sherman's name. An ominous, brooding silence was his answer.

Clawing matches from his pocket, the Ranger lighted one.

The feeble glow showed him Bob Sherman's pallet—empty. He saw no trace of White Antelope. The wickiup had been abandoned.

Hatfield went outside, studying the soft dirt in front of the wickiup. It was covered with White Antelope's moccasin tracks. Moonlight winked on a couple of revolver cartridge cases, lying in the dirt.

And then the Ranger saw two parallel furrows gouged in the dust, leading off around behind the wickiup. Scratches in the loose soil such as a man's feet might have made if he were being dragged away.

THE tracks led off toward a crease between two hills to the south of the wickiup. Hatfield lost sight of them in the thick sagebrush a dozen yards from the squaw's shack.

He slogged his way up the narrowing ravine, shouting.

And then, quite suddenly, the spectral shape of White Antelope materialized from the shadow of a juniper clump ahead of Hatfield, her dark-colored blanket rendering her almost invisible against that

background. Only the gleam of the westering moonlight on her snow-white hair had betrayed her presence.

The squaw's arms were folded across her breasts, a cocked six-shooter was in one hand, and her face was impassive as Hatfield came up to her.

"Sherman — the white man, our friend—"

White Antelope said something in her throaty jargon and turned, beckoning with her head for him to follow.

The squaw, despite her years, moved with surprising speed up the brush-choked ravine. They had gone a hundred yards before the gully terminated in a sprawl of earth where a landslide had blocked it.

Turning right, White Antelope scrambled up the west flank of the ravine, with Hatfield at her heels. And then she halted, gesturing toward a thick motte of buckbrush.

"Sherman's in there? You dragged him this far?"

The old woman could not understand his words, but her gestures were enough to show she understood their meaning.

The Ranger moved around the buckbrush clump, and caught sight of a cavern mouth — an abandoned prospect hole which some miner had once dug—it looked like a black blot against the moonlit hillslope.

"Bob—You in there?"

From the depths of the grotto came an unintelligible sound, a sound made by a human voice. Whipping a match into flame, Hatfield crouched down and headed into the tunnel.

The hole ended in a blank rock wall, a dozen yards from its mouth. The fluttering glare of Hatfield's match revealed Bob Sherman sitting on a mound of rubble, his back braced against the rock wall.

"I'm all right, Ranger," the Broken Arrow cavvy wrangler panted. "That poor old Indian can't weigh an ounce over ninety pounds, but she lugged me up here."

The match went out in Hatfield's hand. He sank to his knees in front of Sherman, reaching out to seize the cowpuncher's hand.

"What happened, Bob? You know that was Pablo?"

Sherman said, "I was sleeping when the shooting started. When I woke up White Antelope was swapping lead with a rider. She didn't know who he was, but he was forking a Broken Arrow horse. One of Rondo's snoopers, coming back to check up on the wickiup, still hunting me."

Hatfield felt a wave of thanksgiving spread through him. White Antelope had kept Pablo at bay, had forced him into beating a retreat! Now he knew why the Mexican had been quirting his horse back toward Dead Man's Gulch. He had intended to come back with Westrip for a showdown with the Comanche squaw.

"She drove off that gunny," Sherman was saying, "but she knew he'd be back. It would be easy for anybody to set fire to the hogan and smoke us into the open. She figured we'd make our last ditch stand in this tunnel."

When Hatfield did not answer, Sherman went on, "Did you go down to the ranch today, Ranger? You must have, to have known Pablo's name—"

HATFIELD had no way of knowing what physical damage Sherman had suffered in getting to this cavern. At any rate, now was no time to break the news to this man that his fiancée was a prisoner of Jules Rondo's down on the Broken Arrow, and at this minute was facing an unpredictable fate.

"I went to the ranch, Sherman," he said. "But I ran into bad luck. Rondo spotted me for a Texas Ranger. Pablo and an hombre named Westrip brought me up to the gulch where they buried the Major, aiming to plant me as well. Pablo came on ahead to scout White Antelope's shack again, looking for you."

"You got away from Westrip?"

"Westrip's dead," Hatfield said, giving no details. "What matters is that you're safe enough for the time being. Pablo will report to Rondo that the squaw's gun kept him from searching the wickiup, but they

have no way of knowing you were with White Antelope."

Sherman was silent a moment, then he said, "Did you tally Pablo after she scared him off?"

"No," Hatfield admitted. "I didn't. It doesn't matter too much, now that I know you're safe."

Hatfield heard the Broken Arrow man release a pent-up breath. "Rondo will be back before morning with a good-sized crew, Hatfield. Pablo knows I'm here."

"How could he?"

"Because when I was awakened by that shooting outdoors, I made a bad mistake. I lost my head. I hollered to White Antelope, asking her what was the matter. Pablo heard me. That's when he pulled out."

A groan escaped Hatfield. This was disastrous news. By now, the Mexican cook was undoubtedly on his way to the Broken Arrow with a double load of evil tidings for Rondo—the news of Westrip's death and Hatfield's escape, and confirmation that Bob Sherman was being hidden by White Antelope.

"You'll be all right for a long siege here, son," Hatfield said, but his voice lacked conviction. "I'll help White Antelope bring grub and water up here. That squaw could stand off an army, in this cave."

The two men were silent for a long interval. Finally Hatfield said, "How did that bullet wound of yours stand the long drag up here tonight, son?"

"I'm all right. It had to be done."

"I know." Hatfield squeezed the man's hand in the darkness. "You take it easy and stay under cover."

As the Ranger was groping his way toward the mouth of the tunnel, Sherman called after him, "I'll tell you what Rondo's move will be, Ranger. He's got a store of dynamite down in the blacksmith shop at the ranch. He'll find out soon enough we're hiding out here. I figure he'll blast the hillside down over this tunnel and bury me and White Antelope alive. If you could talk her into going away—"

"Bob," Hatfield called from the tunnel entrance, "don't forget I've still got cards in this game. You leave this up to White Antelope and me."

Leaving the tunnel, the Ranger saw no sign of the old Indian woman. He did not discover her until he had returned to the wickiup. She was there, filling an olla with water from the pool.

"You get grub," Hatfield said, lifting the heavy olla. "Grub, blankets." He made signs to tell what he meant.

The squaw nodded and headed for the wickiup. Hatfield carried the brimming olla back to the cave.

Bob Sherman was asleep. His recent ordeal had been too much for him. But his pulse was strong, and he was not feverish.

Hatfield made two more trips to the wickiup, helping the squaw bring blankets and cornmeal and jerked meat back to the tunnel. He doubted if Rondo would reach this spot before dawn, but when he did he would bring a heavy force with him, for he knew now that Bob Sherman was cornered.

STILL, a lot could happen before dawn. He left one of Westrip's sixguns with White Antelope on guard in the buckbrush clump which concealed the tunnel entrance. In his haste to leave Dead Man's Gulch he had not brought along Westrip's shell belts, but it was too late to think about that now.

Back in saddle, Hatfield rode up the hill facing the water hole, making a beeline for the Broken Arrow. No use wasting time retracing his route to Dead Man's Gulch. By now Pablo would have found Westrip's body and have left the scene.

Topping a last hogback, the Ranger could see the lights in the Travis ranch house glowing in the pit of the valley, two miles away. He reined up, listening. Sounds traveled far at night. But he heard no drumming of hoofbeats to indicate that Rondo had headed riders for White Antelope's camp.

Keeping Goldy to a lope, Hatfield headed on across the Yucca Valley sage flats, steering a straight line for Broken

Arrow. Pablo had had more than time enough to have reached Rondo with his news, but still there was no sign that the foreman meant to send out riders to seal Bob Sherman's doom. Though lights blazing in the Broken Arrow bunkhouse indicated that the crew was still up.

Halting from time to time, Hatfield searched the night for sounds of activity from the ranch, but still heard nothing. It made him breathe easier, knowing that Rondo had not yet started for the hills.

Playing a lone hand against the odds that faced him here on Broken Arrow tonight was a grim prospect, but one the Lone Wolf would take in stride. Ever since donning a Ranger star he had preferred to work independently. It was fitting that Cap'n Bill should have given him the nickname of Lone Wolf, a name now known throughout Texas.

The nearest reinforcements for him in the showdown to come would be the sheriff and a posse from Warbonnet, but Warbonnet was an over-night ride away. This thing would have to be resolved without help from outside.

A hundred yards from the Broken Arrow gate, Hatfield dismounted and concealed Goldy in a stand of live-oaks. He checked the loads in Westrip's gun. Then heading toward ranch headquarters on foot, he kept to the shade of the trees along the front lane. Nearing the ranch house, he saw a lather-drenched horse at the rack, and recognized it as the mount Pablo Rodriguez had been riding.

The total absence of noise from the bunkhouse puzzled the Ranger. And then, as he came closer to the main house, he heard a rumble of voices inside the front room.

With infinite stealth, he worked his way toward the front porch and up the steps. Moonlight could not reach under the roof over the long gallery fronting the house. Once inside that blot of shadow, the Ranger was able to reach the nearest window.

Kneeling down, he peered around the corner of the lowermost pane. His throat tightened as he saw that the room was crowded with gun-hung, chaps-clad punchers, filling every available chair, the horsehide sofa, squatting on the floor. Here was the Broken Arrow crew en masse.

They were facing Jules Rondo, who stood at the fireplace, hands locked behind his back.

"That's how the thing stands tonight, men," the Broken Arrow boss was saying in a dead serious voice. "Hatfield made his getaway. The odds are good that he will join the old squaw out there at the water hole, to back up Sherman. But we still have the cards stacked in our favor. All I need is a gang of witnesses to prove that Westrip and I had nothing to do with Sherman's getting shot."

Heads nodded and voices made unintelligible responses to the Broken Arrow ramrod.

RONDO'S relief showed in his face. It was obvious why the man had called this mass meeting following the Mexican cook's return from the hills. He was laying his cards on the table, taking the rustler crew into his full confidence, because his own neck depended on their help.

"We've got a good thing of it here," Rondo went on. "It will be only a few minutes before Miss Travis will be turning title to the spread over to me. I, in turn, give you my word to grant each and every one of you stock in the Broken Arrow. I'm not asking your cooperation without offering full payment in return."

A lanky cowhand whom Hatfield recognized as the man who had talked to him upon his arrival at Broken Arrow this afternoon got to his feet in the far corner of the room.

"Reckon you got no cause to think we'd doublecross you, Jules. You know as well as I do that every Tom, Dick and Harry in this room has a bounty posted on his topknot. We couldn't locate a better set-up than the Broken Arrow. We're with you, Boss."

Jules Rondo managed a taut grin. He called toward the back of the room, "'*Sta*

bueno, Pablo. Fetch the girl in here. Let's get the business over with."

Hatfield turned away from the window, fighting back panic. It would be nothing short of suicide to buck this crowd of renegades, but still—

He saw Pablo vanish into the kitchen, heading for the cellar where Judy Travis was imprisoned.

Suddenly the tension left Jim Hatfield. He moved away from the ranch house wall, tiptoed down the porch steps and headed across the yard, halting once to unbuckle his spurs to keep the jingling rowels from betraying him.

He was heading in the direction of the barns and the bunkhouse, sizing up the various outbuildings as he came to them, when he spotted the cooling vat out in front of a squat adobe building, saw moonlight glinting on the horn of an anvil just inside the archway. A wisp of smoke was curling from the brick chimney of the forge.

Bob Sherman had said that the ranch kept a supply of dynamite in the blacksmith shop. Hatfield himself had seen a wagonload of explosives being carried into this shed when he had just arrived here yesterday.

Working against time, the Lone Wolf vanished inside the blacksmith shop. In his long career behind the star, Jim Hatfield had never been faced with such a suicidal predicament as he was tonight. The odds he faced were twenty to one, and to equalize them he had to put his own safety on the line.

CHAPTER XII

Shield for a Lawman

JUDY TRAVIS jumped to her feet from the pallet she had fashioned on the cellar floor out of moldy gunnysacks. Lamplight dazzled her as Pablo Rodriguez opened the kitchen door at the top of the stairs.

The cook was not bringing food or water, as she had hoped. He was coming for her. Her ordeal had to begin sometime, but she had not expected it this soon.

She braced herself, calling on her Maker for strength. She was utterly alone, where human aid was concerned. Jim Hatfield was gone, Bob Sherman was gone, her father was gone.

Pablo came slowly down the steps, crooking a trigger finger in her direction. He seemed ashamed of the task he had to do. Judy sensed remorse in the old Mexican.

"Señor Jules, he say come, señorita," the cook said gently. "Señorita Judy, I have *bueno* news for you."

Judy came shakily forward, surprised at her physical weakness. She had not eaten since her half-touched meal at Pop Huston's in Mirage Junction, an eternity ago, except for some raw onions and Irish potatoes she had gnawed for nourishment down in this Stygian cellar, at Jim Hatfield's suggestion.

"News, Pablo?" she whispered suspiciously.

"Your *querido,* señorita, the hombre you weel marry—he ees alive."

The girl accepted the cook's supporting hand under her arm as they headed for the cellar steps.

"You think I can believe you, Pablo?" she asked bitterly. "Jules told you to tell me Bob was all right. I am not deceived so easily."

Helping her up the steep steps, Pablo said piously, "By the sainted bones of my *madre,* señorita, eet ees truth I speak. Tonight, I hear Señor Sherman's voice—over een the *casa* of the old *Indio* woman by the water hole een the sandhills."

Judy's heart leaped wildly. Pablo's words rang true, in view of what Jim Hatfield had told her about Sherman's hideout at White Antelope's wickiup. Then, as quickly as hope had come, it vanished. Bob's hideout had either been discovered or else Pablo was trying to bait her into betraying Hatfield's secret.

"I don't believe you, Pablo," she said,

as they headed out into the kitchen. "Let's get this over with."

The swart-faced cook conducted her through the dining room, out into the main parlor of the Broken Arrow house. Horror assailed the girl as she saw the punchers waiting for her here—men with strange, malevolent faces, not like the friendly bunkhouse gang she had known in her childhood. These were the renegades Bob Sherman had written her about, the gunslingers Rondo had been hiring steadily ever since she had gone to California.

In a pin-drop silence, Judy Travis threaded her way through the crowded room, shaking off Pablo's arm as she headed toward Jules Rondo waiting at the fireplace. He stood there with one arm lined out along the hand-hewn mantle shelf. A stack of legal documents were held inside the crook of the elbow of his other arm.

Halting in front of him, Judy said, in as steady a voice as she could muster, "The answer is still no, Jules. What do you aim to do—torture me in front of all these men?"

Rondo flushed. He was a man of considerable education and his manner showed his own humiliation now.

"We have located Bob Sherman, Miss Judy," he said. "I will admit that up until tonight I hadn't the least idea of his whereabouts. But I have found him now. I can take you to him within an hour's time."

THE girl's stony smile answered him. "I brought you here to prove that I am not lying about Sherman," Rondo went on. "We are riding over to White Antelope's camp tonight, you and I and a few members of the crew. I am telling you this in the presence of all these witnesses."

Judy said quietly, "And the price of my reunion with Bob is signed deeds to Dad's ranch, Jules?"

"Signed deeds, against my promise to spare you and Bob Sherman. Sparing you is a gamble I must take, a gamble that you will abide by your bargain in the years to come."

Judy drew her shoulders back, meeting the flat strike of the foreman's eyes.

"I make no bargain with my father's killer, Jules. Nor would Bob—if he is alive."

Jules Rondo stood there staring at Judy Travis, mingled frustration and admiration in his eyes. Then he shrugged and turned to face his men.

"You hombres I picked—saddle up. We'll take Judy over to the Indian camp. I think she will change her mind when she sees Bob."

A sudden jangle of breaking glass broke the hushed quiet and a cold draft made the lampwicks jump. All eyes jerked around to face the window next to the front door—and panic welded its chains on the gunhands in that room.

Sitting on the sill of the broken-out window was a familiar red-painted box labeled "HANDLE WITH CARE—DYNAMITE!" The box filled the lower half of the knocked-out window. Framed like a portrait above the box of explosives was the grim, stubbled face of a man with a Texas Ranger badge pinned to his shirt collar.

"Jim Hatfield!" Jules Rondo broke the hush. "You—"

From the front porch came Hatfield's low-pitched voice, timed with the appearance of a sixgun barrel resting over the top of the dynamite box.

"Hold that draw, Rondo. It would take a pretty good shot to hit what little of me is showing, without the bullet striking this box. There's more than dynamite in this case, Rondo. It's half full of percussion caps. A bullet would set them off—and blow this house and every man in it to smithereens!"

Rondo's hand froze on gunstock, his .44 half-drawn. The Ranger was not bluffing. The lower half of his body was shielded by the thick adobe wall; the dynamite was a shield for his torso. One man against twenty—but Hatfield held the advantage.

Pablo was the first man to get his arms

up. In the space of a drawn breath, every renegade in the room had done the same, knowing they faced annihilation. There was every chance a bullet aimed at Hatfield could strike that sinister box and snuff out every life in this room in a blast that would reduce the Broken Arrow ranchhouse to a shambles of smoking wreckage.

Hatfield's gaze slid off Judy Travis and centered on Jules Rondo. The Broken Arrow ramrod had not stirred from his frozen posture, hands clutching gun butts.

"Take Rondo's guns, Judy," Hatfield ordered. "He's trying to make up his mind whether to beat the noose, or—"

Even as Judy Travis moved toward the man who had bushwhacked her father, Rondo made his choice. Both guns leaped from leather and came up, thumbs earing the knurled gunhammers to full cock. At this range—the width of the room— Rondo's bullets could not miss.

Rondo had made his choice: Hatfield's answer was a thundering crash from the gun he held above the box of explosives.

The roar of sound jelled the assembled rustler crew into a tableau as motionless as a photograph. Every eye held on Jim Hatfield, as Jules Rondo pitched slowly forward like a hewn tree, blood making a scarlet gout from the bullet hole in his forehead. His body crashed full-length on the hearth stones.

JUDY was heading across the room toward Hatfield, but the Ranger's sharp command halted her.

"Collect their guns, Judy. We're herding these misfits into Pablo's cellar, the last miserable longlooper of them. They'll stay there until I've brought the sheriff down from Warbonnet to ride herd on them. . . ."

They left the Broken Arrow kitchen by the rear door, after Jim Hatfield had snapped the big padlock on a cellar that was crowded to capacity with the crew Jules Rondo had assembled over the years.

Jim Hatfield had deposited the box of dynamite and percussion caps on the cushioned sofa for safekeeping, alongside the dead Rondo.

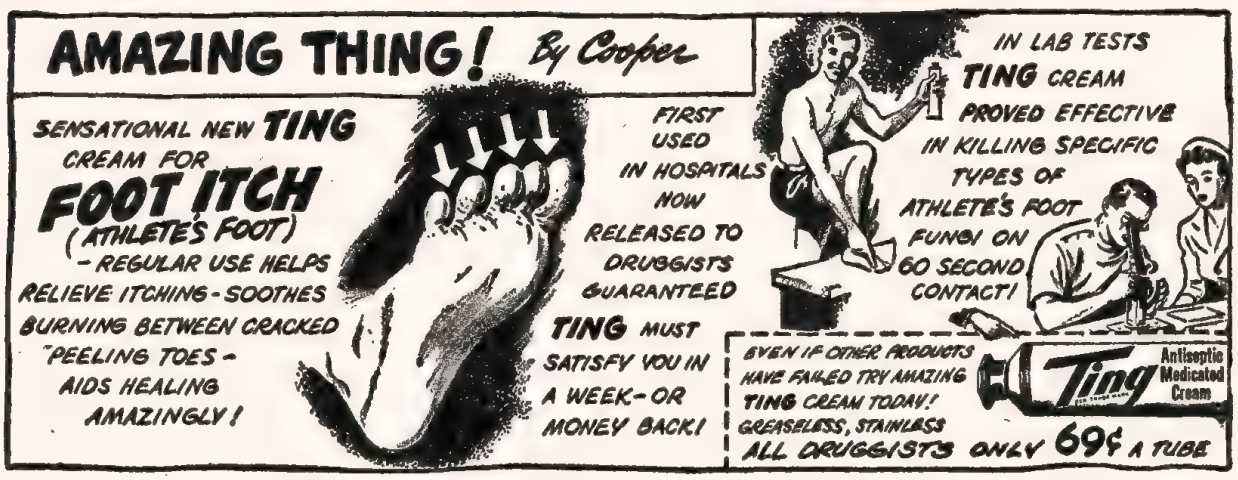
"We'll put a bunkhouse mattress in a spring wagon, Judy," Hatfield was saying as they headed arm in arm toward the barns. "That's the best way to move Bob comfortably back to the ranch. Then I'll light a shuck over to Warbonnet and bring back a doctor—along with the sheriff."

Judy Travis' face was glowing as she asked:

"Haven't you forgotten somebody, Ranger? Somebody every bit as important to Bob and me as a doctor?"

Hatfield eyed the girl blankly. "I don't savvy—"

"A preacher!" Judy laughed. "The only one in the county is the skypilot over in Warbonnet. Before I went away to school he made Bob and me promise to let him preside at our wedding. And I want you to see me safely hitched in double harness before you leave for Austin." ●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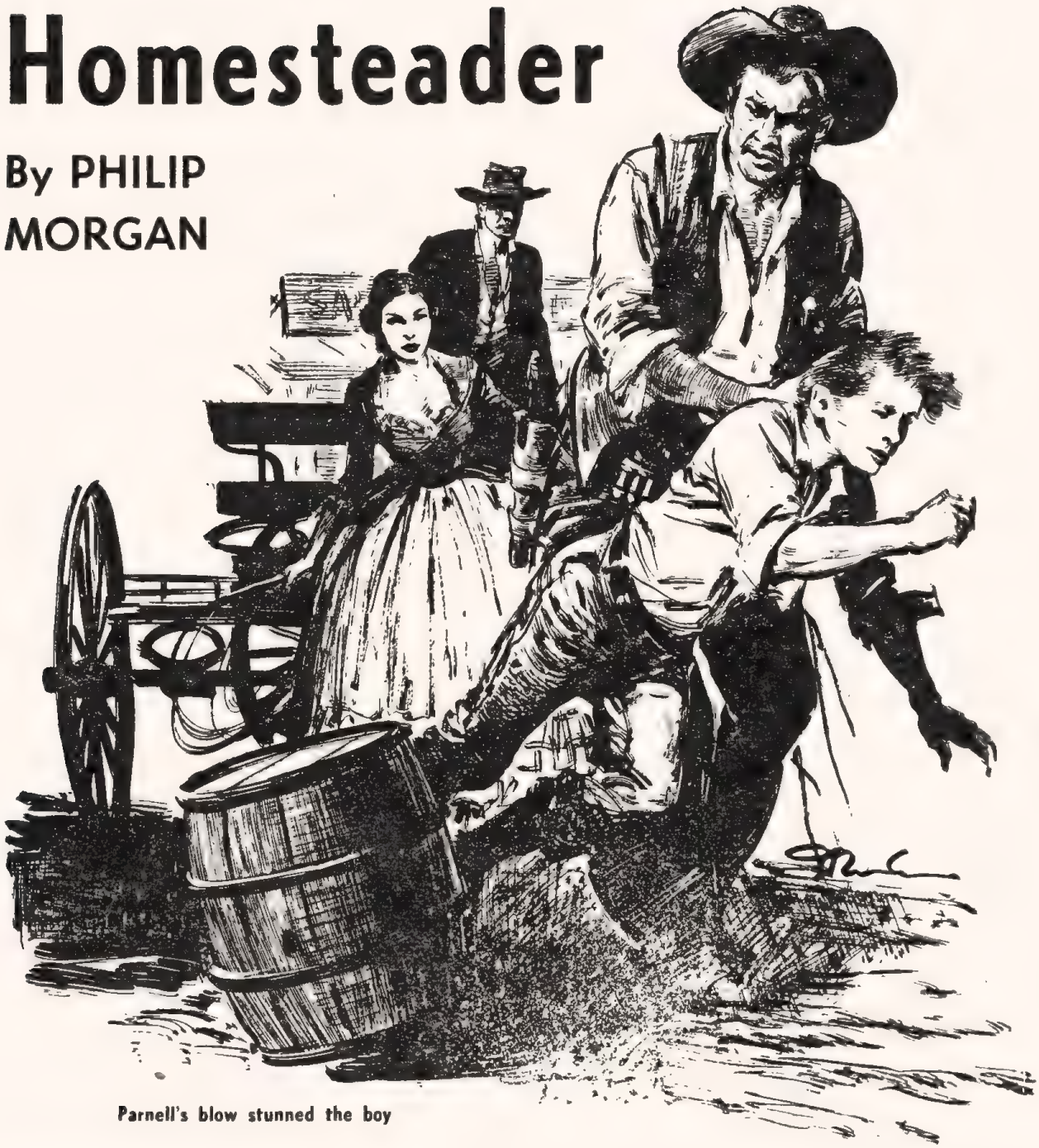


Parnell's blow stunned the boy

THE boy, young Jim Lane, was twelve that summer, tall and gangling and awkward, but showing indication of what he would be when he filled out. Ed Lane, his father, remembered that he had been the same build himself at the same age.

Ed took a lot of pride in young Jim, in teaching him. There was the land to learn about and, the way Ed taught it, the hard work of which to be proud. He taught the boy how to hunt, how to handle a gun, how to stalk deer and antelope.

A woman never seemed to understand that sometimes a man had to fight—even against hopeless odds

With it all, Ed tried to teach Jim something of his own strong faith in the land, of his faith in honesty and pride and courage.

But these things were taught by example, not by words. Day by day he saw the boy growing in his own image and it was good.

Mary, his wife, saw how it was between them and watched them with quiet pride. She didn't always approve of Ed's methods, thinking that sometimes he was too rough with the boy, but she held her tongue. She held her tongue until trouble came.

One August morning when Ed and Jim went down to the creek to get the milch cows, they found the fence cut, the cows gone. Ed stood tight-lipped and looked at the clean cuts in the wire. He glanced across the creek at the land that was owned by Lige Parnell, a cattleman, seeing the plain trail of the cows leading onto that land.

So Parnell's men had cut the wire and Parnell's men had choused the cows across the creek.

It was a plain invitation to trouble that Ed could not ignore.

He went back to the barn and saddled a horse. Jim began throwing the gear on his own horse. Ed was going to stop him, but changed his mind. The boy might as well see how these things went.

When they rode out of the barn, Mary was waiting for them, plainly troubled.

"What's the matter, Ed?" she asked.

"Parnell's cut our wire and run off the cows. I'm going after them."

That was all he said, but she could see that he was angry clear through and it frightened her.

"Don't go now, when you're feeling like this," she begged. "There'll be trouble."

"It can't be helped," he said flatly. "He did it to bait me. I have to make a stand or there'll be no end to it."

"But he'll start a fight. You know how I feel about that. It's caused trouble before, don't let it happen again. You told me you were through fighting. Don't go back to the old ways."

SHE was using an old argument she knew he couldn't ignore. He remembered what lay behind her fears all right. Before they were married, when they had been living in Iowa, he had been wild, fighting and drinking and raising hell in general. Her folks had frowned on his courtship of her, but she'd had a will of her own. She had insisted, though, that he change his ways. And she had told him then that she would leave him if he ever began fighting again.

He shrugged helplessly. "All right, Mary. There will be no fighting."

He rode from the yard, and young Jim rode beside him. Once well clear, Ed laughed wryly and said:

"There's no talking sense to a woman about some things."

"But what'll we do if they won't give us the cows?" the boy asked anxiously.

"They'll give 'em to us. They don't want the cows. They just want to get me over there. Parnell wants to pick a fight and beat me up. He figures I'll leave the country then, and he can get our land along the crick."

They followed the plain trail of the cows across the prairie and found them grazing peacefully a half-mile from Parnell's ranch buildings. As they started the cows home Ed saw three riders cut out from the ranch and head for them. He drew rein and waited, looking forward to this with no pleasure at all. Jim sat beside him, his young face rigid with fear.

"Nothing to worry about," Ed said.

He forgot the boy then, watching the three riders. The man in the center was huge, a barrel-shaped man with long arms and a round head that seemed to sit down full on his shoulders. Everything about him was big, including his nose, which jutted out like the beak of an old eagle.

This was Parnell, the cattleman who resented having a homesteader on grass he claimed. The two riders with him were ordinary cowhands. The three of them pulled up ten yards away.

Parnell grinned wickedly as he demanded, "What you doing on my land, farmer?"

"I came after my cows, Parnell. Have your say and let me get on home. I've got work to do." Ed saw the anger that instantly clouded Parnell's blue eyes.

"Get off—and don't ever come on my land again," Parnell said harshly.

"I'll come back as often as you drive off my stock," Ed said firmly.

"I'll whip you the next time I catch you over here!" Parnell shouted. "I'll mark you up good."

"I won't fight you," Ed said, and felt slow shame climb up the back of his neck.

It was against everything he believed in to back down from any man, but the thought of Mary held his tongue. Still, at the grin that widened Parnell's thick lips anger almost overrode his judgment.

"You're yeller," Parnell said with vicious satisfaction. "Not only are you a no-'count farmer but you're yeller on top of it. Well, listen to me, farmer! I'm going to ride you until you do fight, or get off my land. And if you fight, I'll break your neck. Now take your cows and get out."

He jerked his horse around, sank in the spurs, and went away at a gallop. As Ed picked up his reins his hands were shaking from the effort he'd made to keep his temper. He remembered the boy then, and looked across at him. Jim would not meet his eyes.

"It was the way your mother wanted it, Jim," Ed said.

Jim nodded mutely, but he refused to raise his eyes from the plodding cows. Ed rode home in silence.

They put the cows back in the pasture and repaired the fence. When later they took the cows to the barn and milked them it was in a silence that lay awkwardly between them. He knew what Jim was thinking, and it hurt. He had looked bad there with Parnell, and some of the boy's dreams had died. Until this day, Jim had thought that his father was the greatest man alive, but now he was no longer sure.

ED DECIDED then that here was something he would have to straighten out with Mary.

He waited until after supper, when Jim had gone to bed. Then he took Mary's arm and guided her out of the house. They walked to the edge of the yard, with the full moon showing them the long, even rows of corn that stretched across the land. That corn represented a lot of hard work, and Ed took honest pride in it. But right now he didn't see it. Instead, he was seeing Jim's face as they had started home with the cows. And Mary's face was troubled and anxious.

"It won't work, Mary," Ed said. "I'll have to whip Parnell."

"No, Ed!" she cried. "I won't have you fighting! It's wrong."

"This is different. Parnell cut the fence to get me over there, and he tried to get me to fight. When I wouldn't, he said I was yellow. Jim heard that and right now he thinks Parnell was right. He thinks I'm scared of the man."

"He'll get over it," she said. "I'll talk to him. I'll tell him that civilized people don't fight like savages."

"He won't understand. All he'll understand is that Parnell called me a coward and that I let him get away with it. And this is just the beginning. From now on, Parnell will get tougher. Now that he believes he can bluff me out, he'll keep pushing harder all the time. He won't quit until we leave."

"But he doesn't need all this land," Mary protested. "Go talk to him and tell him we've just taken a little strip. He won't ever miss it with all he's got."

"He knows all that," Ed said, on a sigh, "but he also knows that if we stay others will come. He wants to stop that before it gets started. If he can run us off, others will be scared to come. He can't go too far, because we're on Government land. He can't shoot us, but he can make life miserable for us."

"I don't care," Mary said. "I don't care about anything but you. He might kill you if you fought him. If we just sit here and don't fight back, sooner or later he'll get sick of badgering us. Sooner or later he'll leave us alone. That's the way I want it, Ed."

"What about the boy?"

"He'll have to learn that our way is right," she said with firm conviction. "It's best for him. He'll grow up with a respect for what's right, not thinking he always must fight for everything."

Ed saw that he could not sway her and gave in, because he loved her. It wasn't right, and he didn't think it would work, but in all fairness he owed Mary a try. It was bad about Jim, but maybe Mary could explain it. They walked back to the house.

The next few days were bad. Young Jim was sullen and morose and his mood affected Mary and Ed. They spoke seldom and then it was usually to complain of something. When Ed went to the field, Jim stayed as far away from his father as possible. If Ed was fixing fence, the boy worked around the yard. When Ed moved up to the yard, Jim immediately went down to the pasture.

It was ridiculous, but neither of them felt like laughing. It cut Ed deeply to have Jim ignore him, and he took to harping at Mary, something he had never done. They had several wordy battles. In one week's time their happy household was split, and ugly with tension.

One night, a week later, the sounds of horses and the clacking horns of cattle brought Ed up from a deep sleep with a start. He laid there a minute, his mind befogged, then realization hit him. He came out of bed in a bound. The sounds came from north of the house where the corn was growing and he knew at once what was happening.

Throwing open the door, he looked out and saw the vague shapes of riders chousing the cattle into the corn. The cows had already spread out through the field and were eating and trampling the stalks. Months of hard work were invested in that field and a red haze of murder clouded Ed Lane's mind.

WHEELING, he plunged across the room, yanked his Winchester down from the wall and turned back toward the door. Mary ran to him, caught his arm and held him.

"Don't go out there, Ed!" she pleaded. "They'll kill you."

"I'll do the killing," he said savagely, shook off her hands, and ran from the cabin.

He charged out of the house and, in the yard, looking for a target. But now he could not make out anything. He ran to the edge of the field, the Winchester cocked, held chest-high and ready. The first man he saw, he would shoot! He stood beside the field, bending low, trying to make out the silhouette of one of the riders. He could not. And while he waited, he heard the high yipping of Parnell's riders as they splashed across the creek. Their work was done and they were going home.

A sob of baffled rage rose from Ed Lane's heaving chest. He turned back to the house, discouragement a sickness in his belly.

When Ed came into the house, Mary and young Jim were standing in the center of the room. He put the gun up into the rack and turned to face them.

"They were gone before I could get in a shot," he said in a dead voice. "Go back to bed. I'll saddle up and drive the cattle out of the corn."

"You wouldn't shoot them!" Mary said exultantly. "Because you knew it wouldn't be right."

"I would have killed every man out there if I could have seen them," Ed said.

He saw the unbelieving expression on his son's face and knew that Jim was remembering that other time. It was going to take more than words to convince Jim that his father was not afraid. Even Mary did not believe him. She believed what she wanted to believe—that he had not fought because she didn't want him to. Seeing the futility of talk, Ed left the house and went to the barn for his horse.

It took him a long, tough hour's work to get the stubborn longhorns out of the corn. He drove them toward the creek, then mended the fence where Parnell's riders had cut it to let the cows through.

For awhile he toyed with the idea of

going back for the Winchester and killing a dozen cows in retaliation. He almost did, but then a plan began to take shape in his mind and he forgot about the cattle.

Parnell's men would report that they had met with no resistance. They had not even seen him. Parnell would believe now that he could get away with anything. He would take no precautions, and that would be just fine. Because Parnell was going to get the shock of his life the next time he tried to run over Ed Lane. With a satisfied smile on his face, Ed put up his horse, went back to the house and to bed.

He was up before dawn, but Mary heard him and got up to fix his breakfast. He ate hurriedly, then went out to look over the trampled field of corn. It was a sickening sight, and it added fuel to the blaze of his hatred for Parnell.

The field looked like a scattered box of matches. After all his work and sweat and worry, the corn crop was gone! He felt old and almost defeated in that moment, but it increased his strength of purpose. Parnell had done this and Parnell was going to pay for it.

Mary came down to him and took his arm, but he shook loose and went to find Jim. He found him down by the creek, sitting on a small hummock of ground, staring into the stream's clear water. He was brooding, and Ed realized with a start that he hadn't seen the boy's cheerful smile since that first day they had met Parnell.

"It's tough to lose the crop, Jim," Ed said.

"They should've been shot," the boy said angrily.

"I couldn't find a target," Ed told him, but he wasn't expecting the boy to listen. "Come on, we'll go into town. A change of scenery might do us all good. I'll call your mother."

HE LEFT his son there and went up to the house. Mary, sitting motionless in a chair, as though all the strength was gone from her body. He felt a moment's sharp pity for her. She had taken as much pride in the corn as he had, and was just as sick over its loss.

"Get ready," he told her. "We're going to town."

He wheeled away before she could answer or question him, and went to the barn for the team and rig. When he drove back to the house, Mary came out and climbed up beside him wordlessly. Jim came from the deeper yard and climbed in behind. Ed slapped the team into motion and headed for town. The scheme he had in mind raised his spirits slightly, and he smiled grimly.

In town, Ed dropped Mary off at the general store. Jim got out and went down the street to the feed barn where a group of boys his age were loafing. Ed drove to the saloon, tied the team, and went inside.

He scanned the room as he stepped through the door, half-expecting to see Parnell, even though there were no horses at the rack. But the saloon was empty and it lowered his spirits. He had counted on finding the cattleman here. His whole plan hinged on that. Parnell spent most of his days here.

Ed ordered a drink and knew from the bartender's contemptuous manner that Parnell or his men had spread the story of his refusal to fight. His temper was short and he laid a bright, hard gaze on the bartender. The man caught it and moved quickly away down the bar. Ed had the drink, poured another and stayed belly-flat against the bar, nursing the drink and quietly waiting.

Parnell would come; he had to come. The anger in Ed Lane was so great it was almost desperation. But after two hours of waiting, and it was now noon, he left the saloon.

Driving back to the general store, he helped Mary load her few purchases. She smelled the whisky on his breath, but after a glance at his grim face, she didn't say anything about it. They picked Jim up and went to the Chinese café for dinner.

They ate in glum silence and Ed imagined that the town boys had been giving

Jim a bad time of it. If the bartender had heard Parnell's story, so had everyone else. This increased his feeling of frustration. He had counted so much on Parnell being here, but now he would have to try something else.

They were in the rig and he had pulled out into the center of the street when five riders burst into town, yipping and shouting. It was Parnell's crew, and the big cattleman himself rode in the lead, arrogant and proud.

Ed heard Mary's gasp of fear, and drew rein. But he was laughing to himself, a wild, reckless laughter that released some of the pent-up tension. He had the sobering thought that what he was going to do would probably win back the respect of his son, but might very well lose him his wife. But he had made his decision and he shut the thought from his mind. As he watched Parnell bearing down on them with the greatest possible anticipation, the desire to smash that broad face was a burning wish in his mind. Parnell drove straight down on them, threatening to run right into the team. At the last instant the cattleman and his crew pulled their mounts to plunging stops, scattering dust over the wagon.

Very deliberately then, Ed began to wrap the reins around the dash.

"Well, if it ain't the sodbuster!" Parnell yelled.

He came off the horse and caught the reins of Ed's team. He was laughing and his riders were laughing. That was just fine, too, Ed thought. He was savoring this moment, waiting to see the shock on Parnell's face when his challenge was flung back in his teeth.

"Let go the reins, Parnell," Ed said softly. He was smiling, but his eyes were agate-hard. There seemed to be a cold breeze blowing on the back of his neck and all his senses were high-tuned with the anger he held.

"Get down and make me, farmer," Parnell taunted.

ED HESITATED just one moment more, wanting more of a crowd to gather so that everyone would see. But in that instant, young Jim Lane left the rear of the buckboard in a jump and charged Parnell. His voice was a shrill yell in the hot afternoon sunlight.

"My dad ain't scared of you! He ain't scared of no one!"

Then he was on Parnell, swinging hard at the rancher with his small fists. Parnell had to back up a step, and Jim kept right after him. Ed was out of the buckboard and starting forward just as Parnell swung an open-handed blow that caught Jim on the side of the head and dropped him, stunned, to the street.

Ed was moving in, but Mary was faster then. She grabbed the whip, jumped down, and ran to Parnell, slashing him wickedly across the face.

The stinging pain of the blow brought a sharp cry from the rancher and he retreated a couple of steps, one hand raised protectively in front of his face. Mary had brought the whip back for another blow when Ed caught her arm, took the whip, and tossed it away. She stood there panting, wild with rage.

"Take care of Jim," he ordered her.

She looked into his set face and her anger faded. She said, "Yes, Ed," and went to the boy at once.

Ed faced Parnell across two yards of the dusty street. He was smiling and Parnell, now that the woman was out of it, had regained his former arrogance.

"Parnell, you've been running over me," Ed said. "Last night your riders choused some cows into my corn and ruined it. I went out with the rifle, but couldn't get a shot. I'm glad I couldn't now. They were just hired hands. I'm going to take my payment out of your yellow hide." He laughed with savage satisfaction.

Ed Lane walked forward then, flat-footed, wary. This was what he had planned for today, this fight. Jim and Mary had jumped in before he had had a chance to get into action, but the results were going to be the same. Parnell watched him and surprise held him fast for seconds.

Then he realized that this was a fight and he laughed out loud. He was a barroom fighter, and he outweighed Ed by forty pounds. He dropped his head and charged.

Ed knew he could not close with Parnell and come out winner, so he moved quickly aside. He got set and when Parnell went by, he slugged the man in the thick neck muscles. The blow had a terrific force. Ed felt it all the way to the shoulder.

Parnell went down heavily, but came to his knees, shaking his head. He looked at Ed with a new respect and got slowly to his feet. This time he came in at a walk, not charging wildly. Ed waited and feinted as though to move backward, drawing Parnell in faster. Suddenly Ed moved in then, and threw a hard right at Parnell's jaw The rancher blocked the blow, but he raised both hands doing it and Ed hit him solidly in the belly with a left.

Parnell's breath went out of him and he bent slightly. Ed hit him flush on the jaw with everything he had. Parnell went down again, and there was a concerted shout from the onlookers.

Still Parnell got to his knees again and charged. This time Ed felt the man had been badly enough hurt, and met the charge. They stood up and hit each other with solid, hurting blows. Ed blocked most of Parnell's blows. He hit Parnell in the face, saw the cattleman's nose break, and saw the blood fly. He knocked out two of Parnell's teeth and laughed in primitive satisfaction.

The blows he was taking did not seem to hurt him, and he got careless. Too anxious to finish it, Ed dropped his guard, and Parnell connected with a full-armed swing to the head. Ed was flung backwards by the force of the blow. He went down, and instinctively rolled onto his stomach. His head was ringing and the world was full of blackness pierced by shooting orange lights.

Ed heard Parnell stamping toward him, and got to his knees. His vision cleared and he saw the kick that the rancher aimed at his head. He jerked his head aside in time to avoid the kick and came up onto his feet, swinging his right all the way from the ground. The blow connected solidly with Parnell's jaw, and Ed knew he had broken a knuckle.

PARNELL stood very straight, and reason faded from his eyes. He took one short, halting step forward, then plunged full length to the street. He bounced and rolled onto his back and did not move. Ed staggered to the buckboard, leaned against it, and glared at Parnell's riders.

"Any of you want a try?" he asked. No one answered him and he said. "Tell him that'll happen every time he bothers me. I've had all I'm ever going to take from him."

He climbed stiffly into the buckboard and gathered up the reins. As he drove from town both Mary and Jim maintained silence. Ed Lane drove that way for two miles, then began to chuckle.

He looked over at Mary, then was laughing out loud.

"What's the matter, Ed?" she asked half-fearfully.

"You're the one that don't believe in fighting. I'd like to see Parnell's face tomorrow where that whip of yours slashed him."

She colored slightly. "He is a terrible man. I was wrong about him."

Ed was still chuckling when they drove into the yard.

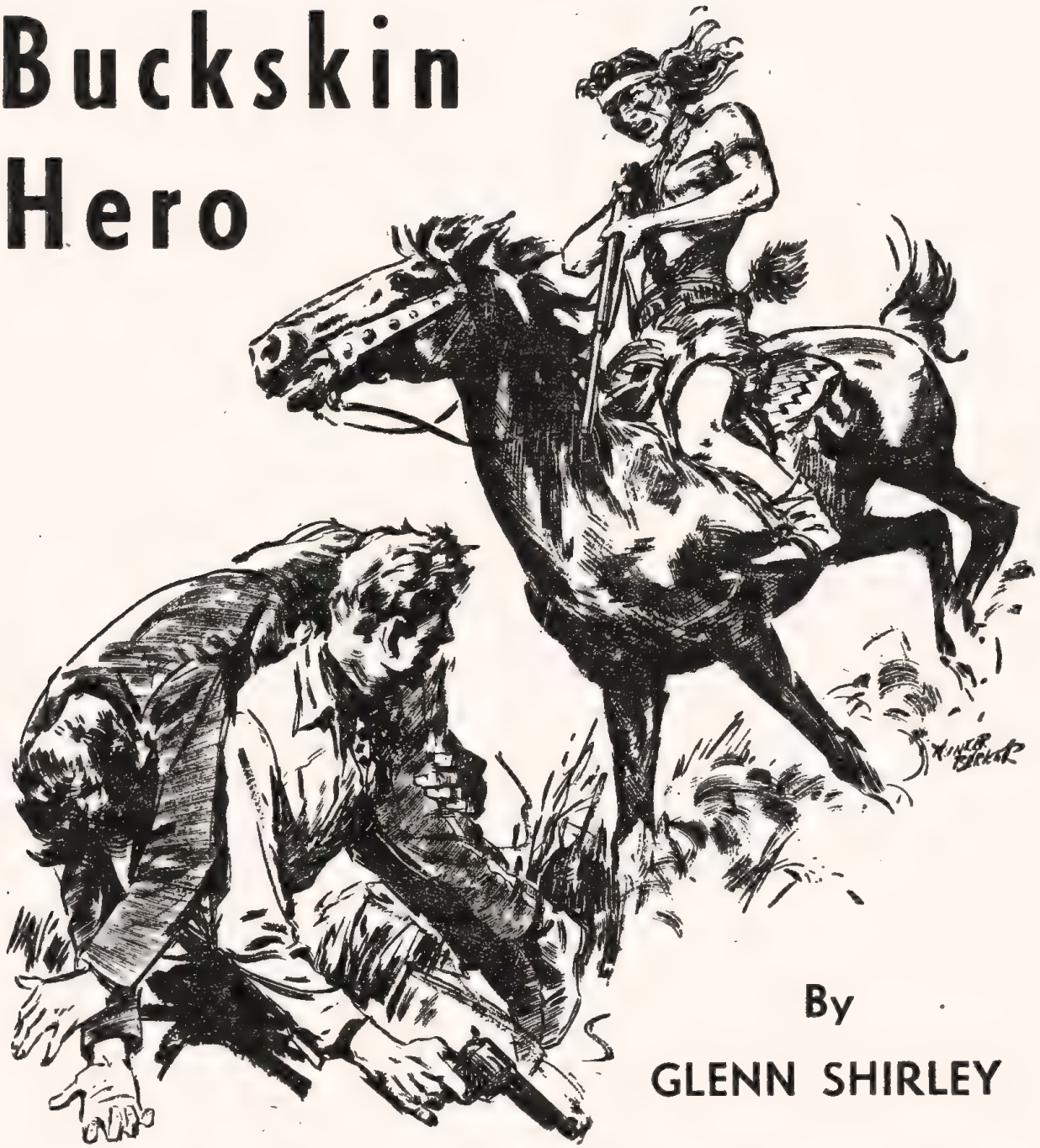
Jim said, "I'll put up the team," and the old respect was back in his voice.

Mary got down and stood in the doorway, waiting for Ed. He stood a moment in the yard, looking at her, not sure yet how she felt about what he had done to Parnell.

"You planned that fight all the time, didn't you, Ed?" she asked, and he nodded. She digested this and apparently settled it in her mind. "Come into the house," she said softly, "and we'll see about your hurts."

She was smiling when he took her in his arms.

Buckskin Hero



By GLENN SHIRLEY

IN EXPLORING the Western wilderness and guarding the frontiers, the army found constant need of men experienced in the craft of the plains, and with a knowledge of Indian language and habits. Of all frontiersmen, trappers made the best scouts and guides. They had learned their lessons from the Indians; they knew every land mark, water hole, the nature of the soil.

Although an army officer, with his instruments and general knowledge of the country, could take a command safely through an unknown region, it could be done with much less delay and suffering by using the services of a scout.

The remarkable true tale of a man bullets couldn't stop

Many of their names will never be forgotten—those of Jim Bridger, Kit Carson, Fremont's famous scout; California Joe, made immortal by General George A. Custer, and Wild Bill and Buffalo Bill, employed by Custer, Merritt and Carr. The story of their lives is the history of the West.

The success of every expedition depended not only on their skill and intelligence in providing good routes and comfortable camps, but they were relied upon for knowledge of the position and movements of the enemy.

This information could be gained only by scouting far in advance, or out from the flanks of the columns. And this often tested a valuable quality that few possessed—courage.

For, strangely, these frontiersmen, so utterly adept at shooting each other for mere pastime, frequently were rank cowards when facing Indians. Even Kit Carson, "the bravest of the brave," would not fight if he could avoid it. He once turned and fled into the night!

As Colonel Richard I. Dodge once wrote:

> Of ten men employed as scouts nine will prove worthless. Of fifty so employed one may prove to be really valuable . . . Though hundreds, even thousands of men have been so employed by the government . . . the number of really remarkable men among them can be counted on the fingers.

One of these, Dodge says, was Amos Chapman. History does not record the date of his birth. He was eighty-four when he died July 18, 1925, on his ranch four miles east of Seiling, Oklahoma. He had spent his life there with his Indian family and relatives after retiring from Government service.

It would take a volume to recite the desperate adventures and hairbreadth escapes he experienced in his fifteen years with the army. But the feat which proved his courage, and for which Congress awarded him the Medal of Honor, occurred in the fight at Buffalo Wallow, just west of the Oklahoma-Texas panhandle boundary on September 12, 1874.

The Medicine Lodge Treaty had been signed only a few years before. The Government had agreed to its terms that buffalo hunters would never cross south of the Arkansas River. But Texas, when admitted to the Union, had reserved all public land, and not having been consulted in the treaty, made no effort to prevent the invasion of hunters within its borders.

As a result, the combined tribes of the Southwest were on the war path. Chaos reigned; murder swept the land.

General Nelson A. Miles was commanding the expedition against the wild tribes of the Indian Territory, with Camp Supply as his base of supplies. By September, 1874, he was camped on McClellan Creek awaiting reinforcements and supplies before proceeding against the marauders to force them to surrender or participate in a decisive battle.

But the Indians had retreated toward the fastness of the canyon country of the Texas Panhandle. In their flight they had cut behind him and intercepted his trains, leaving him stranded, without food and ammunition. When General Miles realized his supplies were low, it dawned on him that he had probably been outwitted by the enemy, and he detailed Scouts Chapman and Billy Dixon to inform Department Headquarters at Camp Supply of the seriousness of the situation.

He offered as many soldier escorts as they deemed necessary. They reasoned that secrecy would be more dependable than large but insufficient numbers, and chose to take only Sergeant L. T. Woodhall and Privates Peter Rath, John Harrington and George Smith.

The six traveled for two nights, concealing themselves during daylight. On the morning of September 12th, while searching for a place of concealment, they topped a rise and found themselves surrounded by a hundred and twenty-five Kiowa and Comanche warriors.

Realizing that whatever chance they had lay in making a standing fight together, they dismounted. The Indians came charging in with blood-curdling yells, and firing their weapons. The scout par-

ty drove the Indians back, but in this first attack, every man of the six was wounded, Smith fatally. Their horses stampeded with coats, canteens and haversacks attached to the saddles.

Without food or water, and in a badly exposed position, the situation seemed hopeless. Then the keen eyes of Chapman spotted a buffalo wallow a hundred yards away. It was a slight depression, only ten feet in diameter.

One after the other, all the men except Smith reached it. While the soldiers kept firing, Chapman and Dixon worked hard and fast with bowie knives to deepen the depression and throw soil around the rim for additional protection.

Under almost constant fire, outnumbered twenty-five to one, the little party of five defended their lives. Down the slope, Smith lay where he had fallen, presumably dead. But when the excitement of the first charge of the Indians had quieted down, the supposedly dead man began to move. Instantly the Indians began firing at him. To leave him out there, helpless to reach the shelter under his own power, meant certain death.

Chapman said to his comrades, "Keep them off me! I'm going down to get Smith."

The besieged men opened fire as the hostiles charged. Chapman, leaving his rifle behind, sprang over the rim and ran full speed to Smith, seized and shouldered him, and began staggering under his weight back to the shelter. Thirty yards away, a dozen Indians swooped down at him on running ponies.

The Indians recognized him and yelled in their own tongue:

"Amos! We have got you now!"

Chapman drew his pistol. Unable to hold Smith on his back with one hand, he let the trooper fall. From the buffalo wallow his companions fired a fusillade, and Chapman began firing his pistol.

The Indians scattered, yelling, and tumbling from their ponies, dead. Only a few escaped. The way was clear, and Chapman again lifted Smith to his shoulder in an effort to reach the wallow.

His pistol was empty, and this time he did not stop to fight. Twenty yards from the wallow, a gaudily painted savage rode almost upon him and fired. Chapman felt his left leg collapse and he fell with Smith on top of him.

Again his comrades opened fire and the Indians withdrew, losing most of their number in the charge. Chapman jumped up, picked up Smith and this time gained the safety of the wallow.

"Amos," said Dixon, "you're badly wounded."

"Naw," replied Chapman.

"Look at your leg," said Dixon.

Glancing at his leg, Chapman saw that it had been shot off just above the ankle. In his last desperate effort to save the life of a comrade, he had walked on bone, dragging his foot behind him.

Smith had been shot through a lung, and when he breathed, the air sobbed out beneath his shoulder-blade. Dixon got a willow stock which one of the charging Indians had been using for a quirt, and used it to stuff a silk handkerchief into the wound to stop the blood.

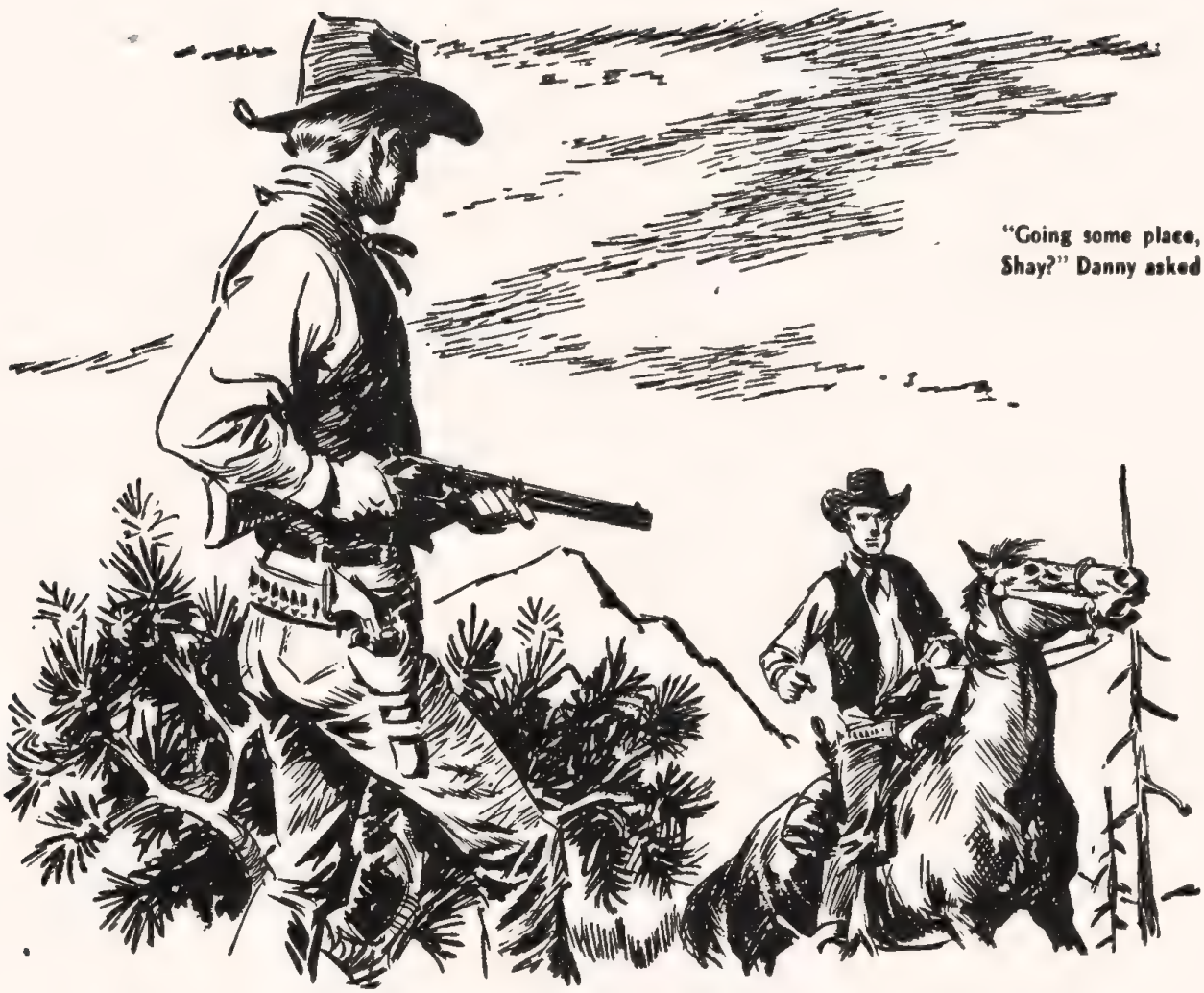
With Smith sitting upright in the wallow, the others moving with brave and painful efforts to conceal their crippled condition, they fought the Indians until dark, sometimes at such short range that they used their pistols, retaining the last charge to prevent capture and torture.

Discouraged in their efforts to best the white man and with the prairie strewn with their dead, the Indians made no further attack. A cold rain began to fall, and the whole band disappeared.

That night Private Smith died. The wounded survivors lay in the wallow and drank the rainwater that collected in a pool mingled with their own blood while Dixon rode for help.

At Camp Supply, the surgeon amputated Chapman's leg below the knee, and a week later had to hide his clothing to keep him in bed.

"He remained in Government employ for years afterward," Colonel Dodge related, "as useful and as ready for a fight as any two-legged scout." ● ● ●



"Going some place, Shay?" Danny asked

Bullets by Moonlight

By TEX MUMFORD

Right out of the blue moonlight came the shots, and lead splintered the door of Danny Garrison's cabin

THAT Sunday night when the shooting began, the old moon was shining like sixty. It turned Danny Garrison's Bar D valley of pines and meadows and a small winding creek into a silvery fairyland that seemed to be cupped in the palm of a giant hand, the fingers and thumb being Ramshorn Mountain and some lesser snow-capped peaks.

But Danny wasn't in no mood to observe the beauty of the night. He lay in his bunk in the two-roomed log cabin he'd built himself, staring bleakly at the streaks of moonlight pouring through a window.

He thought miserably, If she'd said yes

or no, I'd know what was what. But—

The trouble was when Danny had stammered to Della Andrews something about her becoming Mrs. Daniel Boone Garrison in the near future, she'd put her slim hands over her face, bowed her golden head and begun to weep.

"Please, Danny," she'd said. "Please don't make me give you an answer to that. Not now, anyway."

Then she'd fled into Ma Hastert's house where she roomed and boarded.

Danny was twenty-five. Della, who'd come here to teach the Skyview school, was the first and only girl for him. Stunned by her strange reaction to his proposal, he'd straddled his rusty-tailed bronc and ridden to his valley home.

The moon had just been coming up then around Ramshorn Mountain, but he never noticed. He'd undressed in the dark and climbed into bed. But he hadn't been able to go to sleep, and now the moon was up in the sky.

He thought again, She acted kind of scared or something. Maybe I took her too much by surprise.

That was when the shooting began. A single blast of a sixgun.

In one catlike motion, Danny Garrison planted his big bare feet on the pine floor and stood up. He was a tall, rangy young fellow with long arms and big shoulders.

A second shot rang out, followed by some shouts and the stamping of hooves.

Danny's old Winchester hung on wall pegs in the front room. Figuring that was the gun he wanted, he ducked into the room. Just as his big fingers touched the cold steel of the gun-barrel, a heavy body thudded against the plank door. A third shot rang out, and Danny heard wood splinter, and a slug dig into the wall not a foot from his left shoulder.

FOR a moment, he stood frozen, the rifle half-lifted from the pegs. He was scared stiff. He could feel shivers racing along his spine, and cold sweat was beading his bony sunburned forehead.

Then he unfroze and, crouching low, eased over to a window.

Outside, it was almost as light as day. He saw a man, hunched double, stumbling toward the edge of the clearing. Three riders suddenly swung into view, cutting after the running man. Another shot rang out, and the man fell from sight into the black shadows of the pines. The riders swooped after him.

Then, before Danny had time to draw a long breath, it was all over. The clearing was as empty and as peaceful as a Sunday morning in May.

Goggling at the beauty of the moonlit scene, Danny suddenly had a feeling that nothing had happened, that he'd just awakened from a bad dream. Then he saw the trickle of moonlight through the bullet-hole in the door.

"It sure as thunder wasn't no dream!" he croaked.

Heart hammering, he returned to the bedroom, climbed into boots and levis and sidled out through the back door. Keeping to the shadows, he sneaked around to where the man had fallen. No body. Just trampled grass and brush. Either the man had escaped, or the riders had taken him some place.

Danny went back to his house, barred the back door, and crawled back into bed. But since he still was too jittery to sleep, he just lay there, watching the streaks of moonlight drifting along the chinked wall.

And he got to thinking, about a lot of things.

He'd owned this mountain valley three years, had bought it cheap with some money his pa had left him. For a minute, he thought of old Tom Garrison. His pa had spent most of his life in a search for gold. Found a little, but not enough to make him rich.

Old Tom had tried to make a prospector and miner out of his son, but Danny had taken after his mother's side of the house. Horses and cattle, that was what he liked. That was why he'd bought the valley. It was a good place to build up a herd.

It was a place where a man could stay put, too, and live in a house, even if he

had to saw the trees for lumber and build the house himself. And it was a place to call home. Here a man could dream about the future when maybe he'd have a wife, and a family of noisy kids around.

And just like that, Danny was thinking of Della Andrews again.

First time he'd seen her, a couple months ago, he'd known she was the right girl. But after what she'd said tonight, he didn't know where he stood with her. Sighing, he closed his eyes. When he opened them, he was some surprised to see that the first streaks of dawn had replaced the moonlight.

It was when he went into the front room to start a fire in the range that he found the crumpled piece of brown wrapping paper. It had been shoved through the crack at the bottom of the door. Staring down at it, he remembered that a heavy object had thudded against the door last night.

He picked up the paper, smoothed it out and read the hastily scrawled words:

Up Beaver Creek to falls. South toward notch Ramshorn Peak. Follow gully up to—

The note ended with an unfinished abruptness that made Danny wonder if the writer had suddenly found himself in danger.

Maybe, he thought, this was something for Sheriff Fulton to read; maybe not. He'd see how he felt about it when he was face to face with the sheriff, a shaky old codger who gave too much responsibility to a deputy whom Danny didn't much like.

Shoving the paper deep into a pocket, he went outside to look around in broad daylight. But he didn't find anything that gave him any ideas; not even splashes of blood.

A COUPLE of hours later, Danny Garrison headed for the little trail-end mountain town of Skyview. Shortly before noon, he climbed down in front of the sheriff's office and went in. Two men looked up at him. One was Hud Hudson, the deputy. The other was Clay Frazier, a lawyer by profession.

"Something I can do for you, Garrison?" the deputy asked.

He was a chubby young man with a pink face and soft hands.

"Wanted to see Sheriff Fulton," Danny said.

"You won't find him here today." Hudson sort of smirked at Danny. "But you can tell me what you want."

Danny had always figured Hud Hudson got the deputy job because he'd had a pull, and that Clay Frazier had done the pulling. As far as Danny was concerned, that was three strikes against young Hudson.

"Hello, neighbor," Frazier said.

He bit the end off a cigar and surveyed Danny out of shrewd dark eyes. He was a tall, smooth man, with graying hair and a thin mouth that smiled only on one side. A smart, greedy gent, he'd made a sockful of money in Skyview.

Along with his law practice, he'd begun to do some ranching in the valley to the south of Danny's valley. Lately Frazier's Circle F cattle had been crowding onto Danny's Bar D grass. Whether by accident or by design, Danny wasn't sure, but it had him worried.

He gave the lawyer a distant nod and turned back to Hudson. "Come to make a report." Briefly he related what had happened.

"No idea who any of 'em was?" Hudson asked.

Danny shook his head.

Frazier grinned on one side of his thin mouth. "Sure you didn't dream it?"

Danny grinned back, although his heart wasn't in it.

"A dream don't leave a bullet-hole in a man's front door."

Frazier's mouth straightened out into a line.

"As soon as the sheriff gets back to town, we'll ride over and look around," Hudson promised.

Danny walked out into the warm sunshine. He'd decided to save the note for Sheriff Fulton, but right now he wanted to see Della Andrews.

The Skyview school was stuck off by

itself in a grove of pines. Danny climbed aboard his rusty-tailed bronc, crossed the plank bridge over Beaver Creek and rode into the grove. It was noon, and the kids were flocking out of the building and scattering here and there to eat their lunches in the sun. He rode up to the well, pretending he wanted to water his horse. Of course, he didn't fool no one.

"Hi, Daniel Boone!" some of the kids called, grinning impishly.

That brought Della to the door. Looking at her, Danny felt his throat tighten, and his knees turn weak.

The very first time he'd seen her, he'd felt like somebody had poured a bushel of butterflies into him, and he knew now that she'd always make him feel that way. The sun tangling with her bright hair, her smile that seemed to begin about her blue eyes and work its way down to her soft, red mouth—they made her prettier than an armload of roses.

"Hello, Danny," she said.

But her eyes were troubled, and there wasn't no honest-to-goodness smile of welcome for him today.

She glanced about to make sure the kids were all out of ear-shot. One of them wasn't. Red-headed Billy Fulton, old Sheriff Fulton's grandson. The redhead was only nine, but he had a crush on his teacher and didn't like the idea of no big lummox of a cow nurse coming around like this.

"Billy," Della said, "please go eat your lunch."

The button still didn't like it, but he slunk away after giving Danny a dirty hands-off-you-bum glare.

"Danny," Della said, "I hardly expected to see you so soon—not after the way I ran out on you last night."

"Had some business with the sheriff." Jokingly he told her about the fracas at his place. "Figured I ought to report it."

HER eyes were suddenly wide with fright.

"Danny, are you in some kind of danger out there?"

She was scared for him. That made him feel better. "Of course not."

For a moment, she looked relieved. Then again her eyes were troubled.

"About what you said last night—I guess I'd better tell you. You must forget me, Danny. It just can't be—you and I—not the way things are."

Right then he felt every one of those Bar D valley dreams crumbling to dust at his big feet. Well, he asked himself, what could he expect, a big stumble-bum like him?

"Danny—Danny, I—"

She let it go at that, maybe because she couldn't trust her voice, and ran back into the schoolhouse.

Danny climbed into saddle and rode homeward. All the way, he tried to puzzle it out. Wasn't he the kind she wanted to marry? Did she have someone else she thought more of back in her home town in Kansas? Or was she afraid of something?

"Before I give up," he said firmly to his rusty-tailed bronc, "I've got to find the right answer."

But if she wouldn't tell him, he didn't have no more idea than nothing how to find out the truth.

He was still feeling lower than a fish-worm's instep when he broke into the Bar D clearing. But seeing saddle horses, and two men snooping around, kind of jerked the knot out of his stomach.

Seeing Danny the men straightened and came toward him, their spurs jingling. The big bony gent in the lead was Red Reeder, foreman of Lawyer Frazier's Circle F. The short, thick-bodied man trailing him was Shay Emig, an ugly-mugged flat-nosed cowpuncher who worked on the Circle F with Reeder.

"Hello, Garrison." Reeder's narrowed eyes shifted down to Danny's old sixgun and back to his face. "Shay and me was riding through and just stopped to pass the time of day. I noticed a bullet-hole in your door. That made us kind of curious. Mind telling us what's happened here?"

Danny didn't like it, finding these two polecats here. He couldn't help wondering if they'd been inside his house, too.

He wondered why they'd ridden here in the first place. But even if he didn't like the smell of it, there was no point in not being civil. Briefly he told them what had happened during the night.

"Funny business," Emig murmured, rubbing a grimy finger over his flat nose.

"Any idea who they were?" the red-headed Reeder asked.

"No," Danny answered shortly.

"Nice valley you got here, Garrison." Reeder swung up into his saddle. "Wouldn't surprise me much if my boss don't try to buy you out. Or"—he grinned—"squeeze you out!"

The two men turned their mounts and rode into the timber.

Staring after them, Danny felt a sudden tingle of uneasiness. Reeder's parting words could be taken as a veiled threat. Perhaps, he reasoned, that had been the men's real purpose in dropping around to see him—to start him thinking maybe it would be bettter to sell out than to be squeezed out.

But the way he felt about his valley, his home and his dreams and hopes, he reckoned he'd hang on to all of them as long as he had any fight left in him.

He went into the house and looked around. Couldn't be sure whether or not the Circle F crew had been inside. On a hunch, he lifted down the Winchester and levered it open. The gun was still loaded.

He went out to the edge of the clearing where he'd first seen Reeder and Emig. They'd been mighty careless. They'd practically obliterated the signs left by the running man and the three riders. Scowling, Danny went back to the house and began to cook his supper.

THE next morning, Sheriff Fulton and Hud Hudson rode up to the Bar D house and dismounted.

"So a stray bullet did this," Fulton said, putting a thin trembling finger through the hole in the door.

He was a white-headed, shrunken oldster, with a sag to his shoulders and a weary look about his dimming eyes. He'd been sheriff so long he'd become a habit with the voters.

He stumbled into the front room and dug the slug out of the wall with a jackknife.

"A forty-five, I reckon. Since most of the guns in this country are forty-fives, this chunk of lead ain't going to help us find out who was shooting at old Whiskers."

Danny stared at him blankly.

"So you ain't heard it was Whiskers?" Fulton said. "Shay Emig was looking for some strays down by Beaver Creek Crossing and found old Whiskers' body. No bullet-holes—just brush scratches on his face and arms. Clothes half tore off him. Ain't no doubt he's the man them riders was chasing. Me and Hurd followed his trail back here. We figure he got away in the timber and managed to get as far as the creek before his ticker played out. A man his age ain't got no business rushing around in this high altitude."

Old Whiskers—if he'd ever had any other name, no one knew or cared what it was. Long-haired, unshaven, he'd lived the life of a hermit in a shack deep in the wilds of Ramshorn Mountain, hunting and trapping and minding his own business.

"Why would anybody chase him?" Danny asked.

Fulton shook his white head. "No idea. He was in town Sunday afternoon. Went to see Clay Frazier. Clay told me all about it. Whiskers said he wanted to hire a lawyer because he figured he might have some trouble. But the old fool wouldn't say what kind of trouble. Figuring he was about two-thirds loco, Clay got rid of him and didn't think no more about it. But it looks now like Whiskers knew what he was talking about."

Tightening his battered hat, the old lawman limped to his horse and swung stiffly into saddle. The pink-faced deputy followed, and the two rode off into the pines.

Danny went into his cabin and shut the door. He fished the crumpled piece of

wrapping paper from a pocket and again read the pencil-scrawled words.

Old Whiskers had known that he, Dan Garrison, lived in this house. For some reason, he'd wanted him, Danny, to save this note. He'd wanted him to have it so badly that he'd taken a desperate chance, darting out into the clearing to shove it under the door.

The falls on Beaver Creek. Danny had been up there just once—a wild desolate region of giant boulders and scrub pines. He knew about the notch in Ramshorn Mountain. The gully—

He shook his head. Anyway he looked at it, trying to follow those unfinished directions wouldn't be easy. They might mean nothing more than a wild goose chase. But no matter, he'd made up his mind. He meant to make the climb, and no one else was going to read that note. Lifting a stove lid, he dropped the brown paper into the fire.

The next morning, he mounted his rusty-tailed bronc and circled the valley just to make sure his stock wasn't straying out of bounds. And, maybe, to dream a little of the future.

On the south rim, he ran across some Circle F cattle that had worked through a brushy gap. Not happy about this, he rounded them up and drove them back onto Frazier's land. He remembered what that foreman Reeder, had said, and wondered uneasily if the squeeze was on.

Riding back through the gap, he figured roughly how much it would cost to clear a path and string up a fence. More than he could afford at the present, he decided. Anyway, fences could be cut, and there were a dozen other gaps through which cattle could stray. Or be driven.

IN THE afternoon, he rode to Skyview. He wanted to see Della again. And he wanted to know if there were any new developments concerning old Whiskers' death.

Arriving in town, he tied his rusty-tailed horse in front of the post-office. Stepping up on the boardwalk, he met Deputy Hudson.

The lawman had just come from the barber shop after a shave, and his face looked pinker than a rare steak. Squaring off importantly, he gave Danny a condescending grin.

"Heard the latest news, Garrison?"

Danny shook his head.

Hudson's grin widened. Nothing he liked better than to show off to a dumb cow nurse.

"Now everybody knows why old Whiskers wore whiskers," he said. "To cover a horseshoe-shaped scar on his left cheek. His real name was Nels Nichols, and he was hiding out here behind them whiskers because he'd murdered a rancher over near Junction about ten years ago. Now, what you think of that, cowboy?"

Danny didn't know what to think.

"You can't never tell how deep the well is by the handle on the pump," Hudson said.

Pleased at the baffled expression on Danny's lean, brown face, the deputy swaggered on along the street.

Standing there with his broad shoulders against a porch post, Danny tried to put the pieces together. But nothing made sense. Anyway, it was after four o'clock, a good time to find Della alone.

Mounting his bronc, he rode across the plank bridge and into the pines that surrounded the school. The door stood partly open. Swinging to the ground, he went into the building. Della wasn't there.

He didn't have no intention of snooping. He just walked over to her desk, sat down on a corner and idly picked up a book that had something to do with how to teach school. He guessed maybe it was a book she'd used back in her college days. He had an idea it would be mighty dull reading for a ranch boy like him.

Grinning faintly at the thought, he opened the book. But seeing the name on the flyleaf, he felt the grin begin to freeze on his face. For what he read was:

DELLA NICHOLS ANDREWS

Nichols. Anyway you looked at it, that wasn't exactly the kind of middle name you'd expect to be hung on a gal.

He was still staring pop-eyed at the name when Della came into the schoolhouse with an armload of frosted aspen leaves she was going to use for decorations. She looked at him and the book in his hand, and he looked at her. And they both knew the score from the expression on each other's face.

"Nichols," he said, breaking the long, heavy silence.

"Nels Nichols was my father," she answered, her voice so low he could hardly hear it.

But even if Danny was flabbergasted, a great light burst in his brain.

"Is that why you wouldn't give me an answer?"

"You wouldn't want a murderer's daughter for a wife."

Now Danny Garrison didn't know practically anything about girls. But some instinct told him the right thing to do at this moment. He crossed the room in four long strides and took the girl in his arms, scattering aspen leaves in forty different directions.

"Nothing in the world could change the way I feel about you," he said. And then he kissed her slap-dab on the mouth like he'd been dreaming about doing since the first day he'd met her.

She cried a little, and he let her cry until she was through.

"Want to tell me about it?" he asked then.

"Yes," she answered. "The story's going to get out soon, anyway. I understand Sheriff Fulton's gone to Junction to look over old records. He'll soon learn that Nels Nichols had a daughter—and what became of her."

SHE had been ten, she went on to explain then, when the trouble between her father and a neighboring rancher had begun. Water rights had been involved, and the trouble had festered and grown. Then one day, the two men had met alone and they'd had their guns.

Her father had killed this rancher, all right, she said. He'd gone directly to the sheriff and admitted it. But he'd claimed he'd had to do it to save his own life.

"But my father couldn't make his plea of self-defense stand up at the trial," the girl said. "Once I heard my Uncle Jeff talking about it. He seemed to think the prosecuting attorney didn't quite play fair. Anyway, the jury found Father guilty of murder, and he was sentenced to be hanged. But while he was still in the county jail, he managed to escape."

Shortly after Nels Nichols had become a fugitive, Della said, her mother had died, and she had been whisked away to live with her uncle and aunt in Kansas.

"Uncle Jeff Andrews adopted me," she said, "and I went by the name of Della Andrews. But I usually signed my name as you saw it in that book—Della Nichols Andrews."

The years had passed, with not a word from Nels Nichols. Then she'd heard a rumor that he was hiding in this mountain country. And all through the years, she had clung to the belief that her father had been done a great injustice.

Last summer, she'd heard of the teaching vacancy in Skyview.

"I wanted to live out here in this country," she said. "Somehow I believed that he might get in touch with me if he were still alive, that perhaps in some way I could help him."

But the man called Whiskers, her father, had died without ever having come near her. There was no question of his identity either.

"He got that odd-shaped scar when he was thrown from a horse," she explained to Danny. "I was very small at the time, but I'll never forget how frightened I was when I saw him fall."

She was through with crying now. She was defiant and ready to challenge anyone who doubted her belief in her father. And, looking at her, Danny was so proud of her that he felt a lump squeeze up into his throat. Then he remembered the note her father had shoved under his door.

"Della, do you think he knew you were here?"

"I believe he did. I remember meeting

him once, after school, as I crossed the bridge. The way he looked at me—I was frightened at the time. But now, I'm sure he knew me. I resemble my mother, they tell me. And he probably knew that when I went to live with my mother's sister I took the name of Andrews."

Danny suddenly had a hunch why old Whiskers had shoved the note under his door. Because he'd known that Danny had fallen in love with his daughter, and would try to help her. But Danny didn't want to tell Della about the note until he found out what it meant. Then maybe he'd tell her. It all depended on what those scrawled words led to.

He walked with Della to Ma Hastert's place and left her there.

That night, he made a saddle roll of grub and blankets, and oiled and cleaned the Winchester and his sixgun. Early the next morning, he struck out into the mountains, riding his rusty-tailed bronc. He knew a horse could go as far as the falls. From there on, he wasn't sure.

He reached the falls at noon and stopped to eat a cold lunch. Sitting there with the roar of the water in his ears and looking back the way he had come, he saw a flash of sun on metal. He was being followed!

Concealing his horse in a thicket of scrub pines, he back-tracked on foot to where he could watch an open space in the trail. It was not long before Shay Emig came into view, his right spur flashing in the sun.

Crouching low, Danny waited. When Emig came abreast of his hiding place, Danny stood up and leveled his rifle.

"Going some place, Shay?" he asked quietly.

EYES bugging, the paunchy, flat-nosed puncher jerked upright in saddle. Slow-witted, and taken by surprise, he couldn't seem to think of an answer.

"Who told you to follow me?" Danny asked harshly. "Reeder, or Frazier?"

Emig found his voice. "None of your damn' business!"

Danny didn't have any time to waste on the man. All he wanted was to get rid of him long enough to lose him.

"Shuck your gun, turn around and ride back," he ordered.

Without a word of protest, Emig unstrapped his gunbelt and let it fall. Giving Danny a look of hatred, he rode back along the trail and was soon lost from sight.

Danny returned to his horse and rode on, keeping his mount's nose toward the notch in Ramshorn Mountain. He reached a deep, rocky gully at sundown. He didn't think Emig would follow now without a gun, but he couldn't be sure. So he hid his campfire under an outcropping of rocks.

At break of day, he headed up the gully with only the faintest hope of finding anything, now that he'd come to the place where the old man's directions had ended. But he hadn't gone a mile when he stumbled onto something—a trickle of water from the granite wall of the gully, making a clear pool in a rocky depression, where someone had been digging with a short-handled pick.

A tiny flake of yellow on the point of the pick told the rest of the story. Nels Whiskers Nichols had discovered gold!

But Danny, who had worked in this uncertain prospecting business with his father, didn't jump at any conclusions. He set to work with the pick. In a couple hours, he knew the truth.

The old man had found nothing but a small pocket that some strange quirk of nature had planted here in the wet rocks. Just enough gold to make an inexperienced man think he'd struck it rich.

Frowning, Danny swung into saddle and turned back down the gully. How the man had happened to stumble on this pocket no one would ever know for sure. But he'd probably stopped for a drink and—

That was when Danny's thinking took a sudden turn. That gold strike was the missing piece of the puzzle.

Old Whiskers had thought he'd struck it rich and had wanted his daughter to have her share. Knowing there might be

some legal difficulties, since he was outside the law, he'd gone to a lawyer for advice and had been doublecrossed. Some way he had realized this and had managed to get away from Clay Frazier without telling him the location of the strike. But Frazier and his men had caught up with him in the Bar D Valley.

Sure, it had to be that way! The grasping, money-hungry Frazier had no way knowing the old man's find was a fluke. And once he'd made the oldster reveal the location, he'd intended to get rid of him. Making a man disappear in this mountainous country wasn't much of a problem.

But again old Whiskers had given them the slip. And he'd died before they caught up with him.

Then Danny's thinking took another turn, and suddenly a cold shudder ran through him. The lawyer was nobody's fool. He had put two and two together and had come up with the right answers. Sending Shay Emig to trail Danny was proof of that.

Now that Emig had failed, maybe Frazier would try to find out if the girl knew anything! What he and his men might do to make Della talk, Danny didn't know. But he was plenty scared.

It was almost dark when young Daniel Boone Garrison rode into Skyview and swung from saddle in front of Ma Hastert's house.

"No," Ma said, frowning worriedly, "Della ain't come home from school yet."

HE CROSSED the bridge and rode to the schoolhouse. The door stood partly open. Della wasn't there. But her light fall coat lay draped carelessly over a seat back. That wasn't like Della. She was a neat, careful girl. And her lunch pail lay on the floor where it had been dropped, its contents scattered.

Staring down at the lunch pail, Danny felt his fear turn to terror. He could think of but one place to look for Della. At the Circle F.

He thought of going back for help, but with a sheriff too old for the job and a deputy who was Clay Frazier's man, it seemed a waste of time. And time meant everything.

There had been a jar with some milk in it in the lunch pail. The milk had spilled, but it hadn't dried. That meant that they didn't have much of a start on him. Maybe if he hurried—

Running outside, he vaulted into saddle and rode like all hell was after him. He thought he'd never get to the Circle F, but at last he did and left his horse with three others near the barn.

There was a light inside the house, but he couldn't see in, because the shades had been drawn. Then he heard Della's voice, angry and frightened. And he knew that Frazier and his men held all the aces!

Those men would never let her go now. They wouldn't dare. How, Danny asked himself, did a man go about winning against odds like this?

His roving eyes fixed on an old haystack—and an idea came. He fired the stack and leaped back into the deep shadows of the house. Someone inside saw the blaze and yelled.

Frazier and Reeder came running out. That left Emig inside with Della.

Keeping low against the foundation, Danny moved fast. He skinned up over the edge of a narrow front porch and dived through the open door flat on his stomach.

An oil lamp threw a yellow glow over a square room where Della sat cowering in a chair. Emig stood over her, a sadistic expression on his ugly face, a gun in his fist.

As he heard Danny he spun around and fired, but in his haste he overshot his mark. Danny let him have it high in the chest, knocking him back away from Della. His second shot sent the puncher stumbling to his knees. Emig coughed, and fell forward on his face.

From outside came curses and shouts, a splatter of boots on the hard path leading to the house. And Della Andrews came to her feet in one swift motion and blew out the lamp

"Good girl!" Danny said.

In the sudden darkness, he came up on his knees, facing the open doorway. In the blaze of the burning haystack behind them, Frazier and Reeder were sitting ducks, and they both realized it.

Frazier sent a wild shot rocking toward the dark doorway; then leaped for the shelter of a big wooden water tank. He didn't quite make it. He crumpled up against the tank with a bullet in his hip. He lost his gun and he lost his nerve. Putting his hands over his face, he screamed with pain.

Reeder, however, raced for the horses. He swung up and rode like an Indian, keeping the horse between himself and the house. There wasn't enough of him in sight for Danny to shoot at, so he let the man go.

But suddenly gun flame burst from the darkness, and Reeder went tumbling to the ground under the plunging horse's hooves.

And the next minute the old man whom Danny had thought too old to be a sheriff, rode into the light, a smoking six in his thin hand.

"That red-headed grandson of mine—the one that's got a crush on his teacher," he explained, grinning faintly at Della, "was hanging around the schoolhouse grove, hoping to walk home with her when he saw them three sidewinders drag her out and put her on Red Reeder's horse, behind him. By the time the kid found me and told what had happened—I'd just got back from Junction—well, looks like I got here after Danny had done most of the work."

THE sheriff slid stiffly to the ground. And while both Danny and Della were still too astonished to speak, he went on:

"Della, while I was in Junction, I went back over a lot of old records. 'Course, I know who you are now. I reckon you never heard what happened to your pa's old ranch? You was just a kid then, and left soon after the trial. Anyway, the whole business was kept mighty quiet. Likely your pa never even heard the whole story."

Della Nichols Andrews shook her head. "All I ever heard was that the ranch went to pay off the mortgage."

"The prosecuting attorney's nephew took it over," Sheriff Fulton said. "Hung onto it until a railroad was built across it, giving him a chance to make a big chunk of money. Whenever there's a lot of money involved, I get kind of suspicious. Don't reckon we'll ever be able to prove that all that money had anything to do with your pa being found guilty of murder—the prosecuting attorney died five, six years ago—but I figure it won't do no harm to ask his nephew some questions. Even if he has got a bullet in him and ain't feeling so good out there by that wooden water tank."

Stunned by this sudden turn in events, Danny and the girl silently watched the old sheriff hobble to where Clay Frazier lay.

"You," Fulton said grimly to the lawyer, "have got a lot of fast explaining to do!"

"So have you, Danny," Della said suddenly, in a whisper. "How did you find me here? What did Clay Frazier mean when he said I had to tell him where to find a gold mine?"

Turning, he looked at her—the light from the fire against her hair and her lovely face and her soft red lips—and felt all those butterflies churning to life inside him.

Sure, he had some things to explain to her. But this didn't seem like the time for it.

Not with what else he had on his mind.

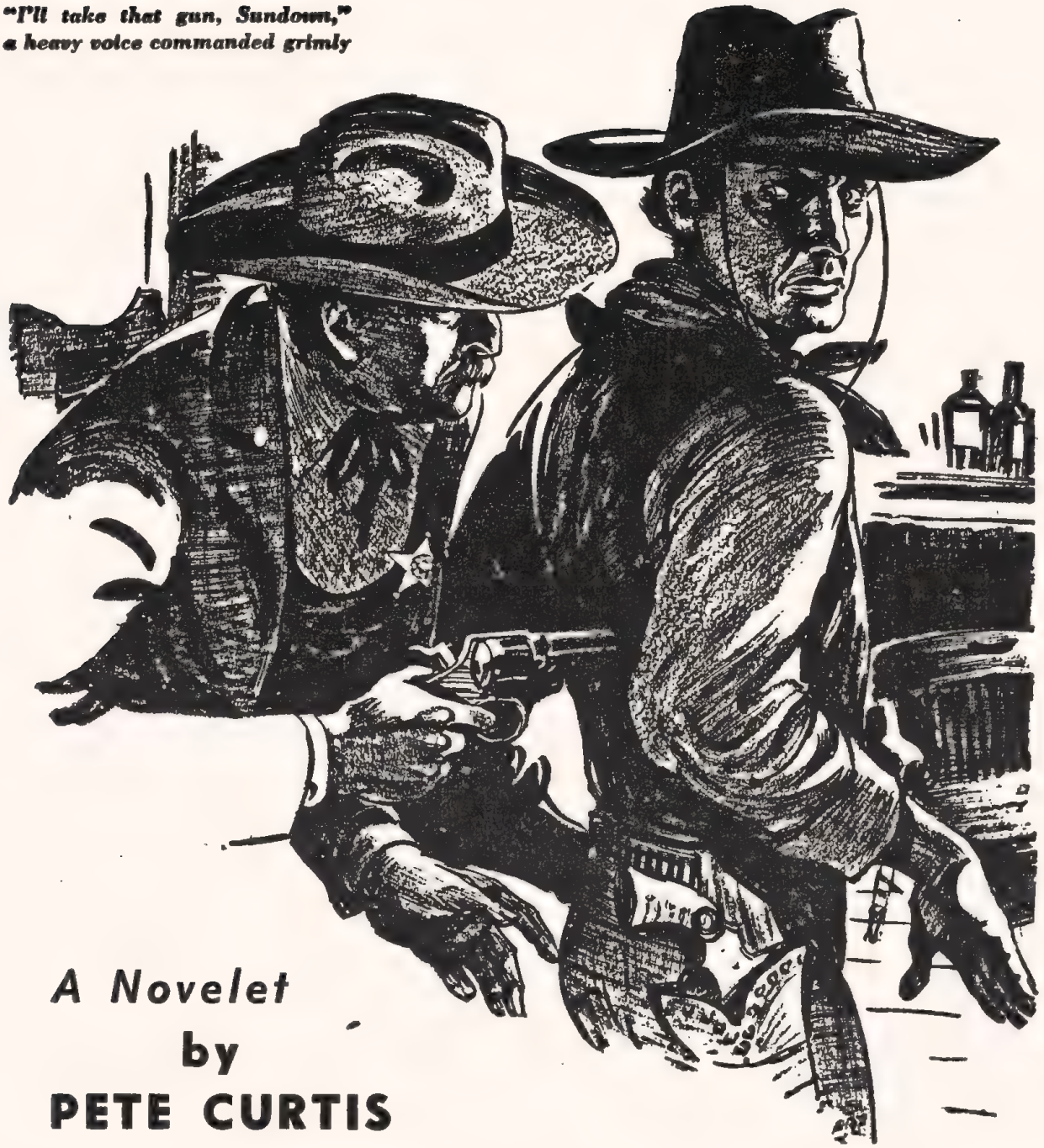
"Do you know something?" he said gently.

"You've never said yes or no. Now, I'd like to know."

"It's yes, Danny," she said softly, her eyes as bright as the stars in the mountain sky.

And Daniel Boone Garrison put his long arms firmly around her and held her very close. ● ● ●

"I'll take that gun, Sundown," a heavy voice commanded grimly



A Novelet
by
PETE CURTIS

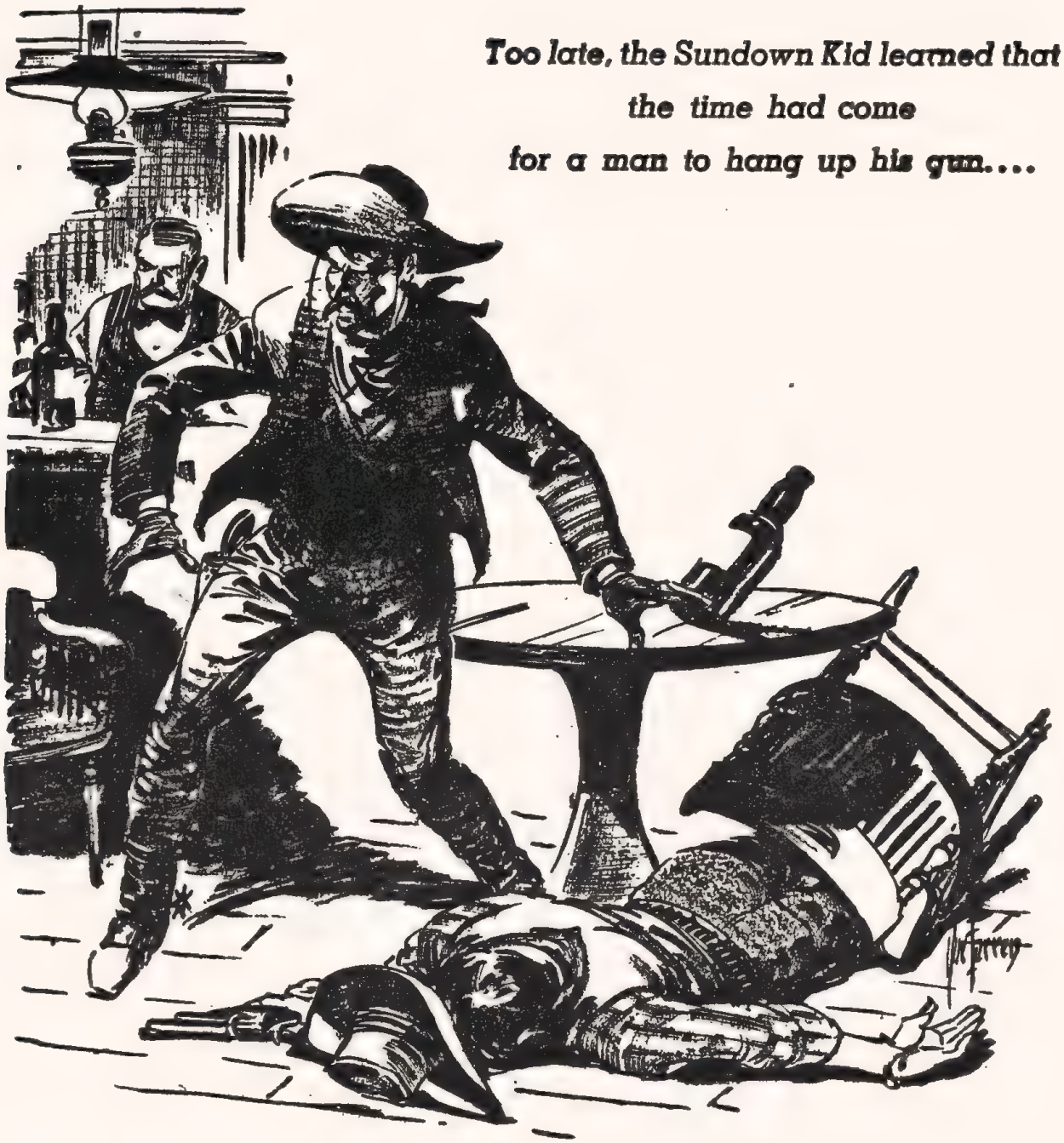
TAME THE

CHAPTER I

Saddle Tramp

TIME WAS when the Sundown Kid could ride into certain towns and find ready sleeping quarters and free meals from well-wishers. But times had changed. Seven years in a federal prison had made the Kid lose perspective. He came out of jail the same way he had ridden in; fickle, cocky, and with a devil-may-care attitude.

His looks hadn't changed much, either. He still had that youngish, tanned, smooth face, with heavy-lidded, sky-blue eyes. And his lithe, slender body was even thinner, but definitely harder, from prison



Too late, the Sundown Kid learned that the time had come for a man to hang up his gun....

WILD SON

food and work. He was a good-looking cuss and he knew it. He also had an eye for the ladies.

It so happened that a vengeful corn-silk blonde had been instrumental in acquainting the Kid with a rock pile. When the gang he had been riding with was sent scurrying through the brush country and seeking mountain passes, the Kid had looked up a border town dance hall girl and holed up in a shanty a little south of the Border.

Trouble was, the Kid got mixed up with another girl on furtive, periodic visits to

the settlement and the little blonde, fuming with jealously, had sicked the law on the free-wheeling desperado.

With what money he had saved before he entered prison, the Kid, on his release, bought a new sorrel horse, reclaimed his old saddle, the yellow-boned sixshooter and worn carbine, and trailed south for the border land once again.

He had no idea where his future lay. He didn't think much about it, though. He thought idly of looking up old acquaintances in various towns and tying in, perhaps, with a favorable proposition. He did not want to do much hide-out brush riding. That sort of life no longer had any appeal.

The Kid was hoping, maybe, that he could get on the payroll of some town boss, a man who wasn't exactly particular about the way money was made. In that way, he could enjoy the unpredictable company of the weaker sex at any time he felt inclined. Only the devil and the Kid knew how much he had missed them in six years.

His first stop of inquiry was in the settlement of Skyville, high up on the benchland of the Colorado Plateau. The Kid rode into the cluster of shanties and buildings one hot windy evening. Dust curled up from a main street devoid of men and horses. A hot silence lay over the burg. Human activity seemed at a standstill.

In front of the brown sand-scathed hotel, the Kid looped the pony's lines around the warped hitchrack, mounted the spur-scarred, worn steps leading off the boardwalk and entered through open doors. It was a contrast, the murky stillness of the lobby and the sun-bright street. In the half-light the Kid narrowed his sharp eyes.

There was no one around, and his scrutiny perceived that the lobby looked much shabbier Seven or eight years of hard traffic could quickly change a place. A musty smell was strong in the high room.

The Kid sauntered over to the lobby desk. He was trail marked; a pale gray dust setting in all the creases of his clothes, bleaching his chin stubble and eyelashes and brows. He cuffed his stetson to the back of his head and rapped loudly on the desk top. It was some time before the door in back of the counter opened. A small, humped-shouldered oldster wearing spectacles and a green eyeshade came through the doorway, blinking sleep from his eyes.

The Kid remembered the man as the owner of the place. "How's business?" he asked jovially, his thin, hard lips smiling frankly. "Looks sort of dragged out."

The old man was surprised. "Beg pardon?"

"Don't remember me, do you?"

The hotel-keep shook his head in a puzzled way, the distended eyes behind his glass lenses running over the Kid's sun-and-wind roughened face.

"I roomed here, seven, eight years back," the Kid told him. "Say, where's Bull Bainley hanging out these days?"

The oldster started, looked more sharply at the Kid and then in a soft tone just above a whisper, without being conscious of the drop, he said, "Bull Bainley's been dead some three years now."

The Kid's eyes widened. "The hell you say! That news completely slipped my ears."

The other leaned forward on the counter, the Kid's easy ways giving him a penchant for asking confidential questions. "You used to know Bainley, son?"

"Know him?" the Kid expressed proudly. "Bull Bainley and me trailed together, pop, till I got saddle-itch and moseyed south."

"Well, son," the hotel man explained, "Bainley and his gang was shot up by the law; real rowdy-dow it was, too. Law and order around here now, young feller. Kind of miss the old times, though. Mighty good for business."

THE SUNDOWN KID took off his stetson and trailed long fingers through his black, damp hair. "Pretty tame in this neck of the woods, eh?"

The old man nodded his head, then cleared his throat with a touch of embar-

rassment. "Been away, son?"

The Kid's blue eyes twinkled. "Been away seven years, old-timer."

"Well, now that's quite a spell," the other conceded. "And a lot of things have changed in this territory since. It just ain't like it used to be. It ain't by a long shot.

"Bull Bainley dead and gone in this section, of course. Matt Conley and his boys wiped out about a year earlier down Morenci way, and old Henry Bowden, who used to work out of the Painted Desert, chased clean out of the Territory. Last I heard he was up in Wyoming robbing the trains. Don't recollect if they ever got him."

"I remember them boys," said the Kid, dazedly. "Ain't nobody around? How about Johnny Dancy? If anybody could steer shy of the law, Johnny could."

The hotel man fingered his chin with a blue-veined hand. "Johnny Dancy . . . Johnny Dancy," he muttered, thinking profoundly.

"Raised from a pup over in Jerome," the Kid offered. "Used to ride with Bowden once, but loboed most of the time."

"Sure! I reckon it comes now!" wheezed the old one excitedly, slapping the flat of his hand on the counter. "Had a fight with a U.S. Marshal and killed the feller. Over in Flagstaff, if I recollect. Anyhow, the law had him holed up in the 'Frisco Mountains and toted him out dead."

The Kid tipped the stetson low on his bronzed brow and let out a long, breathless whistle.

"It all happened about the time you went away," the old man continued. "Few years either way. Everything's changed, son. Small time gangs break out once in awhile, but the law keeps 'em controlled right well. Federal and local law now, you know. Most of the owlhoots that's left lone-wolf it. Some settling down, some working the chuckline and such. . . ."

The Kid chewed contemplatively on his lower lip. He was beginning to feel a mite lonely. "Of course, we're a spell north," he reminded hopefully. "Maybe it ain't so bad along the Border."

"No sir!" the thin-shouldered man corrected. "It ain't big. Big gangs and big money have seen their day, son. By the way, what'd you say your name was?"

"I didn't," answered the Kid softly, but with a pleasant grin. "They call me the Sundown Kid."

The hotel man jerked perceptibly, his watery, faded eyes lighting up with surprise. His cracked lips folded in a taut line. "The Sundown Kid," he murmured with disbelief. "I heard tell of you many times."

The scrawny gent was obviously excited at seeing the fabled Sundown Kid in the flesh. "Say, Kid, they tell how you used to be real smooth with a shooting-iron—fast as greased lightning—" The man's eyes trailed to the low-slung .44 on the Kid's leg. "That yellow cutter the same you always used?"

"The same," grinned the Kid.

"Snaky-fast yet, eh Kid?"

"I figure I've lost the knack," said the Kid, deprecatingly. "Hands are fat with callouses. A pick's more in my line now. Say, I'd like a room for the night. I'm heading south first thing in the morning."

"Glad to oblige, Kid. Room No. 3 got a nice soft bed in it." He tossed a ringed key and the Kid snatched it out of mid-air.

"Got to hole up my horse, then I'll be back. Livery still located in the same place?"

"Old one burned down a few years back. New one's down the street about a hundred yards along." The old man kept looking at the Kid with admiring eyes.

The Kid was about to turn when a soft, brown-eyed girl with creamy skin moved gracefully down the worn, once-carpeted stairway. She was dressed for the street, and as she walked through the lobby her flickering doe's eyes dropped self-consciously from the Kid's direct stare. He had gazed at her with unconcealed pleasure and surprise She opened her parasol as she stepped out to the walk and the Kid saw sunlight pick out golden sparks in the abundant, tawny hair. Then she was gone from his sight, and he won-

dered if a few days' rest in Skyville wouldn't be the wiser thing.

His brows had remained highly arched, and the old hotel-keep chuckled, "Sweet little gal, ain't she? The new sheriff's daughter, by the way. The family's staying here till the sheriff can get a house built."

The Sundown Kid playfully ducked his head. "I'll be riding south, first thing in the morning."

CHAPTER II

No Work for a Gunfighter

EARLY that next day the Kid was on the trail again. He rode leisurely, looking over the land that was once a part of his playground. Into the deep, heated stillness of Apacheland he rode, and later forded the Gila River. Then he picked up the San Pedro River trace and headed on south toward the Border.

Days later he arrived in Tombstone. It certainly wasn't the bustling, wide open town that he had once frequented. A lassitude pervaded the scorching brightness of Allen Street, which sadly lacked the intensity he remembered on this once heavily trafficked lane. The mines were played out, he figured. Maybe one or two still operating.

He glanced casually at the buildings on either side of the street, recalling the wild, easy, high-flying times. Riding near the intersection of Fifth Street, his eyes swept across a corner where once he had stood with bucking sixgun. A gambler had died from his accurate lead, and the Kid glanced at the spot next to the curbing where the man had lain. He rode on, his pony weary, lathered. The Diamond Bar was boarded up, a forlorn shell. Farther down, the old Ace of Spades, with paned windows broken and jagged, was shut down in like manner.

The Kid sighed disgustedly. There was no doubt about it, times had changed, and—in his opinion—for the worse.

He turned his horse to the rack in front of the Miners Luck, the first drinking establishment in town that he had found open for business. A few grubby old-timers and drifters lingered outside the doors, eying the Kid and his trail-stained horse with feigned disinterest.

The Kid dismounted, set his side scabbard comfortably and slipped through the swing doors. There were few customers in the box-like saloon. The Kid glanced swiftly about, and memories flooded back. Dejectedly, he ambled to the bar. Three men drank there, bootheels hooked on the brass rail. Two old desert rats, nursing shots, and a dirty bum, half-asleep, off by himself at one end.

As the bartender came along the back side, the Kid murmured, "The usual." He planted elbows on the mahogany, stretched his saddle-hunched back, and took out his tobacco dust.

A bottle and shot glass was set in front of him. Swilling the biting drink around his tongue, he mused critically, "Not like it used to be, or maybe I've lost the taste." He lingered over the shot quite a spell, fingering the glass in deep meditation.

He was about to question the barkeep for information as to the whereabouts of certain personages he had known, when a gruff voice rumbled behind him. "Howdy, Kid!"

The Sundown Kid looked up with a start at the reflection in the cracked back-bar mirror. Then he turned on a heel, and gazed hard at the grinning, florid face of the speaker. A hefty but powerful man, wearing town clothes, proffered a hairy hand. The Kid gripped it strongly.

"Bard Ringallis!" he exclaimed, his face beaming. "Say, Bard, it sure is good to see you!"

They shook hands with earnest pleasure, and the big man slapped the Kid's shoulder, kicking up a little cloud of dust. "Got alkali coming out your ears, Kid," he grinned. "Just rode in, I take it?"

"All the way. And even this here red-eye won't unbend me."

"That stuff will kill you," the big man laughed heartily. "Can't afford the good swill now. Come on back to the office and I'll treat to a taste of the best."

"The office?" asked the Kid, puzzled.

"Why sure, Kid," informed Bard Ringallis. "I own this dump now."

FOR a fleeting moment astonishment ran the Kid's face as he followed behind the big, sloping back of Ringallis, feeling as though he had found his place to roost. They entered a small room. Ringallis threw open the one window. There was a roll-top desk by the window and two wooden chairs. The saloon man took out a couple of shot glasses and a bottle of his best from a desk drawer.

After a few pleasantries and idle talk of old times, the Kid began sounding Ringallis out. "I reckon you're doing all right, eh Bard?" he asked intently. "How's things stacked up?"

"Can't complain," was the big man's answer, his little black eyes squinting out at the Kid from flesh creases.

"Well," said the Kid. "If I remember rightly, you always kept your pockets well loaded down."

Bard Ringallis laughed merrily. "I did at that," he agreed. "It's all straight business now, Kid. Nothing fancy. Truth to tell, I just get by."

"The hell you do!" breathed the Kid skeptically.

"It's the truth," the big man emphasized. "Bought the joint from Zeke Morley after a vigilante committee hustled him out of town. You know how Zeke had his fingers in all the shady corners. Well, I was wandering around then like an old, lost wolf, and the missus and girl was taking all the rough spots right along with me. They stuck by when I was sent up and was waiting when I got out.

"I figured it was time to settle down and give 'em a peaceful rest for a spell. Been at it ever since. It ain't so bad this way. I was getting too old for the owl-hoot path, anyway." Ringallis looked at the Kid with a benevolent smile on his thick lips. "You hunting for a fast ride, Kid?"

The Sundown Kid was visibly depressed. "When I saw you out yonder, I figured certain my troubles were over."

Ringallis darted shrewd, uneasy eyes over the younger man's features and his voice lowered, took on warning tones. "They ain't riding fast hereabouts, Sundown. Those that don't halter up get corraled mighty fast nowdays." He filled the glasses again, paused in thought.

"Tell you what," he said finally, quickly. "There's a dandy spread some miles northwest of here that a smart gent could buy off right cheap. Good graze and enough water. When set up good, there's more land flanking the east that can be bought off and—"

The Kid waved a negative hand, shook his head. "No, Bard. I ain't hankering for that kind of work. I ain't got the loot for it."

"Never figured you had," Ringallis told him in a booming voice. "I could maybe get you a loan. A man working that

SIX-HOUR SEASON

THE white-winged dove is to the Rio Grande Valley, what deer and turkey are to the Hill Country of the West.

The annual whitewing season, short as it is, attracts hunters from all parts of the United States.

The actual shooting time involved makes the whitewing sport rather exclusive, for the season lasts just about six hours.

This is figured roughly on the basis of two hours each day of the open season, that being September 15, 17 and 19, giving both birds and hunters a rest on the 18th.

The bag limit is ten a day and ten in possession. There are enough uncertainties in the whitewinged sport to make it very attractive for the birds swoosh in incoming flocks, catching the gunner off balance and the Texas Game, Fish and Oyster Commission scientists have estimated that 30,000 of the estimated 250,000 birds killed in a season, are never recovered.

—Katherine Bevis

spread right shouldn't have no trouble getting out of the hole in no time, and beef is selling like it never did before, what with transportation facilities coming along the way they are—"

The Sundown Kid chewed on a lip and gazed at the floor with a disturbing light in his eyes. "Bard," he said to the big man sincerely. "I sure do appreciate your interest in trying to set me up. But I ain't ever going back to herding a bunch of mangy cow-critters. No sir! I been caged up too long to start living like a damned old hermit. I'll just scout around some, thanking you all the same, Bard."

Bard Ringallis reproved sarcastically, "You're looking hard and fit. Your back ain't broke after them years on a rock pile."

The Kid had no rejoinder. He glanced at Ringallis' heavy, sweat-shined face with an indifferent shrug of his square shoulders. "Know of any outfit what needs a fast gun, Bard?" he asked innocently.

The massive saloon owner snorted in open irritation, but sudden concern etched his face. "Now you listen, Sundown, and listen hard— There ain't no range wars, there ain't no rustling, or smuggling that amounts to much—the coaches don't haul enough for a man to wink at any more. The only people running things now, are law people. The old outlaw roost, Gayleyville, is in another time. It's over—done. Our kind don't rule the roost no longer."

"Sounds like a hard ride," the Kid muttered disagreeably.

"That's the way the wind blows," Ringallis said. "And don't ask me to give you a job. I don't need no faro dealers."

The Kid glanced up in surprise, then grinned. "How'd you know I was gonna ask that?"

"Hell, I could smell it!" Ringallis rumbled. "You hombres always want to retire on your fannies!"

THE two one-time saddle pards rose, chairs scraping across the floor. They left the stifling whisky stenched interior and stood outside under a wood awning. Heat waves rose along the hot, dusty street.

"You found a place to park your heels yet?" Ringallis asked.

"No. I was figuring on the hotel."

"Well, walk your horse down to the corrals and I'll meet you at the hotel later. You clean up and we'll amble on over to my shack for some supper. The old lady'll be glad to see you, and I got a hunch Betty Lou'll be too. That sound all right?"

"Sure," agreed the Kid, a smile tugging at his mouth corners.

"Right now I got to see a jasper about some money I owe. See you soon, Kid."

The Sundown Kid watched Bard Ringallis tramp off down the boardwalk, and shook his head sadly as he thought of the big man running a legitimate business. He stayed for a moment making a smoke, and then walked out to his horse.

A drawling voice inquired, "Come a long ways, Sundown?"

The Kid's blue gaze lifted as he paused from taking the lines. A long legged jasper was leaning against an awning post, the eyes trailing over the Kid with faint humor. Pinned to the man's chamois vest was a tarnished law star, and a walnut-butted gun was slung far down on the right thigh.

The Kid eyed this man narrowly. "Don't believe I've had the pleasure of seeing your face . . ." His pony stomped a forefoot peevishly and swished its tail.

"Name is Will Black, Deputy United States Marshal in this town. Heard you were paying us a visit."

The Kid's cool eyes drifted slowly over the sun-drenched, whisky-sotted faces of the loafers in front of the saloon. Most of them were sitting on a plank bench, watching him with inscrutable expressions. He didn't know any of the faces, but one of them must have known his.

"Just looking around, Black," he answered slowly. He was mildly surprised that he addressed the man so cordially. In years past he would have told the lawman to go hang himself with his own rope.

"An honest man is always welcome," Black returned evenly.

The Sundown Kid felt his heart pound unnecessarily quick, and sudden anger flushed his face. This law-johnnie was a nervy cuss, he thought.

He let his hands drop to his sides and stepped back from the rack. "Maybe you'd better uncloud your palaver, Mister Black," he murmured ominously.

A tight grin formed on the lawman's sunburnt face. "Nothing to get roweled about, Sundown. Just introducing myself and making sure you know how things stand around here now. No use being so touchy." His voice was quiet, level.

The Kid peered at the man with a questioning, hard scrutiny. Black made no pretensions as to his position, and he had laid it on the line to the Kid, straight and simple. The Kid didn't like the soft prod; he didn't like a man talking to him as if he were a saddle-bum. But for the moment he could not think of the correct play. Seven, eight years ago—gunplay, probably. Now, the other's disarming ways baffled the Kid.

He loosed the lines suddenly, stepped to saddle. He swung his pony out and cantered off.

Black called, "See you around, Kid."

The Kid did not glance back, but lifted a hand as a sign of having heard the remark. Down the hot, powder-dry street he rode, toward the O. K. Corral, a puzzled, uncertain ex-outlaw.

CHAPTER III

Restless Sixshooters

SUPPER at Bard Ringallis' house was a pleasant affair. And Ringallis' daughter, Betty Lou, was a full-bodied, pert-nosed girl who constantly held the Kid's attention.

Mrs. Ringallis was pleased at the way Betty Lou and the Kid seemed to take to each other, but her husband, although evincing gruff joviality, watched them with a shade more concern than that of fatherly solicitude.

He knew the Kid from old, knew his wild, reckless ways. They had all been of that nature, he realized, all of a kind, but the Kid didn't seem to want to change. The passing years, and time in prison, could stunt the passion for fast living in the outlaw of normal disposition. If it did not he was either spending the rest of his life behind steel bars or dead as Jesse James.

Ringallis had felt the uneasiness the moment his daughter and the Kid laid eyes on each other. "Betty Lou Ringallis," the Kid had marveled, his eyes taking in her charms. "You sure growed up to be a peach, Betty Lou."

"And you're just as handsome as ever, Sundown," the girl had replied somewhat saucily.

The Kid blushed with happiness but countered with, "Shucks, how the devil would you remember how I looked. You was nothing but a pig-tailed squirt then."

Mrs. Ringallis had said, "You were her first love, Sundown, even if you didn't know it at the time."

Everybody had laughed, even Betty Lou, whose cheeks were ruddy from embarrassment. Then they had all gone in to supper.

For a month or so the Kid tried his luck at the green-felt tables in Bard Ringallis' Miners Luck and in the old Cosmopolitan up the street. Had his winnings been as frequent as his losses, his livelihood by the cards could have gone on indefinitely. As it was, it came time, finally, for a reckoning; he was about broke, standing at the crossroads.

The Kid took the hardest path, the hardest for him, at least. Betty Lou Ringallis was indirectly responsible, for the Kid was seeing quite a lot of her, and if he continued to do so he knew he must have a semblance of respectability. So, for the first time in many years, he got a riding job, with a cattle spread north of Tombstone.

Three months of that sort of hard work, at forty dollars per, was about all the Kid

could stand, despite the Ringallis family and Betty Lou. When word casually reached his ears by bunkhouse gossip that a ramrod called Curley Young was starting to throw a wide loop down Calabasas way, it took the Kid the better part of five minutes to decide in which direction to turn his bronc's head.

The Kid knew Curley Young from the old days—the wild, free days that had passed so swiftly. Curley had always played it close to the vest, a smart gent with a quirk for making fast, easy money. To the Kid, this was vindication of sorts, flouting the coffin-lid advice of Bard Ringallis and of all the others who claimed a man could not make a living any longer by his daring and gun.

His warsack packed, the Kid trailed into Tombstone, for the purpose of bidding the big ex-outlaw a farewell, but he took particular pains not to run in to Betty Lou.

"And why Calabasas?" Ringallis asked.

"Figure I might nosey around," the Kid answered.

"And your noseying will lead you straight to a gent named Curley Young, right?"

"Well," the Kid grinned. "You can't blame a fellow for looking up an old saddle pard, if he's somewhere along his trail."

"You're more loco than I figured," Ringallis snorted. "You seemed to be doing all right out there at the Circle X—getting your feet steady on the sod. No need to tell you, Betty Lou'll be mighty disappointed . . ."

The Kid glanced away, and said nothing.

Ringallis added a sour note. "Give Curley my regards." It was almost a sneer.

THE KID rode a seldom used trail through mesquite to enter the settlement of Calabasas. It was a trail remembered from his past. He came off the slope and swung on to the main road, to ride between the lines of adobe and wood buildings. From one of the saloons, a tinny piano and a banjo wafted out a roundup lament. For an evening, there seemed to be a tolerable amount of activity.

Ponies stood three-footed at the racks, and quite a few women were making the rounds of the stores. Passing a side street, a cluster of men milling about down the street arrested the Kid's progress. Out of curiosity, he turned his pony and cantered on down there.

The group was before a big barnlike building, obviously a sporting house. Dark haired women were looking down at the scene from second story windows and a white-faced, blond percentage girl stood in the entrance, holding open a batwing door.

The Kid pulled up and stood in the stirrups to peer past the heads of bystanders. He saw two men face down in the dust. They looked pretty dead to the Kid.

A man kneeling beside one of the bodies, his burly back to the Kid, stood erect. The Kid knew instantly who the gentleman was; the old sheriff of Calabasas, Frank Maddock. Over by the hitchrack, a younger man was searching through the saddlebags of a couple of horses. The younger man walked over to the group and the sheriff said matter of factly, "Turn 'em, Joe."

The face of one of the dead men narrowed the Kid's eyes. A scowl cut his dark forehead. He was positive that he was staring at the open-mouthed countenance of Curley Young.

He eased back resignedly. Despair clouded his mind as he built a smoke. Putting match flame to the tip, he saw that Sheriff Maddock was now watching him with a puzzled soberness. The seamy, tough-hided face of the old man was grave as he stepped toward the Kid.

"Didn't know you at first, Sundown," he grumbled hoarsely. "Looking for somebody?"

The Kid, cigarette hanging loosely and smoke swirling from his nostrils, met the sheriff's inquisitive stare. "I was hankering for a talk with Curley Young."

"Go ahead and talk," Maddock mo-

tioned. "Only I reckon you'd be doing all the palavering."

"Reckon I would, at that," the Kid smiled faintly. "You take 'em both, old man?"

"Joe here got Curley, and I threw down on Willie Deuce," the sheriff growled. "Now, if your curiosity is satisfied, do me the same pleasure—what you doing in Calabasas?"

"Ain't I welcome?" the Kid intoned, grinning disdainfully.

"No. By hell, you ain't! We can get along without your kind."

The Kid curled his lips and spit to the dust, close to the sheriff's boots. "This is the Sundown Kid," he replied coldly. "You seem to be forgetting that. I come and go, when and where I please."

The old man's face was the color of a deepening sunset but he held his peace. He had nothing to prod the Kid for, outside of his being within his domain, and he remembered the Kid's deadly speed with that yellow-handled .44. So he said nothing further, only returned the steady gaze of the cold, blue eyes.

The Kid swung his pony and headed back along the side street. Glancing back, he saw the old man still watching him. He gave a wave of the hand, as a gesture of contempt. It was not returned.

BUT the Sundown Kid was more disturbed inside than he had permitted the old sheriff to see. He felt suddenly at loose ends, a depressing restlessness taking hold of him. Curley Young was the last of anything resembling the big times of the past, and now Curley was riding down that long trail. Curley would have welcomed the Kid eagerly to the fold, for the Kid ranked with the best of his kind.

His mind went back to the days of wandering since he left prison. All the old outfits were dispersed, most of the members six feet under the sod, a few riding out long jail terms. Then there were those who were polishing the dollar, the same as Ringallis, and others nothing but drunken trail bums. Plenty of law now, the Kid realized, and too many folks who wanted to sweat and break their backs day in and day out for a measly living. . . .

The Kid swore vehemently. He thought of Will Black over in Tombstone bracing him in that cool, surprising manner, and of the old man, Maddock, who should have been in boothill long ago from a slug in his ribs. These lawmen seemed of a different breed than those he had known earlier. Even Maddock seemed to have lost his easygoing ways.

He pulled in to a saloon's hitchrack. With irritation biting him, he swung the batwings sharply inward, and tramped directly toward the bar, looking neither to the right nor the left, his mind preoccupied. He was startled to hear his name called out. He jerked his head around, his long frame halting in his tracks.

Two men sat at a far corner table, grinning at him. One of them half stood up and motioned for him to come over. Recognition lit up the Kid's features. They were the brothers, Smokey and Bitter Woods, a pair of gunmen as ruthless and savage as any who had ever hit the Territory.

They were a big notch below the Kid's own inept moral codes, but they were men he had known before his prison days. He and they had ridden in the same bunch one time, when rustling could garner a man a fortune, depending on the extent of his operations and the way he went about it.

The brothers greeted him in their reserved, expressionless manner as they all sat at the table.

"You see the powwow down by the Blue Bell when you rode past?" Smokey Woods asked. His mouth was merely a shapeless slash cutting a long, hawk-nosed face, sun-and-wind cured to a deep brown. His brother, Bitter, was not unlike him. Both men were above medium height, but very slender and wiry, with catlike quickness when needed. They were a humorless pair, these Woods brothers, with fixed, devil-like grins that did not show in their slitted, murky eyes.

The Kid's gaze went from one brother to the other. He said, "I don't get it. You

two setting here peaceably, when the sheriff and his man went gunning for Curley and Willie Deuce. Don't tell me it's pure chance, all you boys being bunched in one settlement."

"You heard about Curley?" Bitter murmured.

"That's why I rode in. Wanted to scout the play over some."

"It weren't nothing to do a jig over," Bitter rasped sourly.

Smokey Woods leaned forward, and his voice lowered, although there was no one else in the building except the bartender, busy behind the bar. "We rode with Curley and Willie, all right. But it was a mighty risky ride—night guards real thick by the herds—both sides of the border. Everybody knows it was us throwing a wide loop, but nobody got proof. The reason we set so peaceably, now, is because Curley was wanted for a killing up in Tucson—no concern of ours. Willie just happened to be siding Curley at the Blue Bell, and grabbed for leather instead of sky. That young feller with old Maddock is a U. S. Marshal."

Smokey poured himself a shot of whisky and downed it swiftly. "So here we set," he continued, "free as wind and just as breezy. Heard you was penned up for a spell, Sundown. Me and Bitter saw the inside of Yuma a couple years back ourselves."

THE KID gave a brief resume of the doings that led to his prison sentence, and in muted, fervent terms expressed his dissatisfaction with life since he had got out. He told of Ringallis riding a straight trail, and questioned the brothers about men he had once ridden with on the old Outlaw Trail, that unchartered line extending from Canada to the Mexican Border. Of those he named, they had all come to the same ending; death by lead poisoning.

When he told of his riding job for the Circle X above Tombstone, it brought forth rare, awkward laughs from Smokey and Bitter Woods.

"That prison jag must of locoed you up plenty," Smokey opined, the sarcasm unintentional. "I declare, that's a ringer—the Sundown Kid punching cows with a bunkhouse crew."

Ordinarily the Kid would not have been rankled at such a remark, but his spirits were at such low ebb, caused by the aimless outlook of his future, that he took exception. His elbows came off the table and his back straightened. The sudden bleakness of his eyes as he gazed at the brothers was enough to stir tension.

He murmured slowly, "You gunnies been living any higher?"

The Woods kept long, watchful stares on the Kid, and the only hint that showed their surprise at the Kid's abrupt agitation, was a minute lift of Smokey Woods' brow. In a soft, easy tone, Smokey said, "You got fire behind your eyeballs, Kid. There was no prod to them words. Simmer down."

"Guard your blamed tongues then," the Kid muttered with heat.

Bitter Woods peered at the Kid's face with lazy wariness, his eyes partly shut. The nostrils of his long, thin nose were flared from some inner stirring of an endless rancor, directed against that part of life which crossed his trail.

He said, now, "You got plumb mean, Sundown."

"Yeah," Smokey agreed. "Ain't the same hombre we used to know, eh Bitter?"

"You can't flick an eyelid around him no more," Bitter mocked gently.

The Kid knew then that he had crossed that thin, intangible line which constituted a brace in the eyes of Smokey and Bitter Woods. Smokey, perhaps, would overlook the mishap, if the Kid elected to make amends. But he knew that Bitter Woods's code had been violated and, if he emerged now without gunplay, in some future time and place Bitter would prod him in that same mocking voice, and then their guns would roar.

His pride, however, was an unyielding quality that would never allow him to back down. If the two brothers had remained silent and pursued other conver-

sation, the moment might have passed with nothing more than brief ill-will. But no man played tough with Smokey and Bitter Woods. He had forgotten the full evilness of their reputation. Bumping a sidewinder would have been less dangerous.

CHAPTER IV

The Wild Son

THE Kid pushed his way up from his chair, his right hand hanging free. He stood there a moment, returning the hazy, enigmatical stares of the two vicious brothers. They did not move, and their hands remained in plain sight. The Kid shoved his chair back with a foot, pulled in a heavy breath. Then he did a foolish thing; he turned his back on them and started toward the swing doors.

He abruptly discovered how rotten was the core of Bitter Woods. His eyes fleeted across the barkeep's pallid face as he walked, and in that face was a sign, a warning that could only mean one thing.

The Kid wheeled, his hand flashing to the yellow-butted .44 tilted out from his right thigh. At the same time, Bitter Woods' sixgun smashed its report and the shot burned a crease in the Kid's shoulder, a bullet intended for the center of his back. His sudden turn had saved him. He squeezed trigger then, saw Bitter's shirt flap in where his own lead thudded solidly into Bitter's chest.

He thumbed back hammer, his aim falling on Smokey Woods. That man yelled desperately, "I ain't gunning, Kid!"

The Kid instantly released trigger pressure as he saw Smokey's hands dart overhead, empty.

Bitter had slumped to the table. His hunched body eased back slowly, slipping, his eyes squeezed shut. Then he hit the sawdust, and the table and chairs jounced. Bitter's legs quivered, a shudder traveled his frame, and he lay still.

Gunsmoke curled heavily in the airless room. The barkeep stood as if he were made of stone. The smashing reports had started the Kid's ears to ringing. His heart thumped wildly and sweat began trickling down his flat cheeks.

Out of twin-slitted eyes he watched Smokey Woods, and he heard clumping boots along the boardwalks outside. He was aware of men starting in through the doors, and slamming their way back out, heels and spurs making a racket.

Slowly, he leathered his gun. When he spoke, his voice was tight, strained. He rasped out at Smokey Woods, "You'll live for one thing now—gunning me down. I don't hanker to take it in the back, along some out-trail. So lower your hands—go for your gun!"

Smokey Woods shook his head in swift negative. "Naw—naw, not me, Kid." His eyes glazed with fear of death but also smouldered with hatred. "You gotta kill me like this—my hands empty. Then you'll hang!"

Scorn twisted the Kid's mouth corners. "Yellow backshooters," he murmured with slow, caustic emphasis. He waited, unmoving, watching for the effect of his words, but instant fight did not kindle in Smokey Woods. The man remained adamant as the Kid again repeated the stinging, most disgraceful word of the Frontier.

With a contemptuous, hollow laugh the Kid backstepped. But a pointed object rammed into the small of his back brought him up short.

"I'll take that killer gun, Sundown," a heavy, rough voice commanded. It was Sheriff Frank Maddock.

The Kid felt weight leave his hip, saw Smokey Woods start to lower his hands. "Watch that yellow polecat, Maddock," he warned. "He's aching for a backshot!"

"Take Smokey Woods there, Joe," the sheriff addressed the United States Marshal siding him.

The marshal strode forward, gun in hand. "Easy does it, Smokey," he drawled.

"Hell! I ain't throwing down on that gunslinger. You got him dead to rights! Come sashaying in here on the prod, braces my brother and shoots him down like a dog!"

The Kid stared incredulously, then a hard laugh broke from his throat. "A lie, Maddock," he husked. "A bushwhacker's lie. Bitter aimed to plant one in my back and he missed. Ask the bar-dog. He saw it all." A tight, confident grin stayed on the Kid's lips.

"How about that, Rudy," the sheriff said to the barkeep.

The bartender, his thin, sallow face dead-panned, looked from the Kid to Smokey Woods. His tired eyes fastened to Sheriff Maddock's features. "I saw nothing—nothing. I heard two shots—but I saw nothing. I was facing the other way."

The easy, sure grin left the Kid's face, and in Smokey Woods' cloudy eyes was a devil-glint.

The Kid shouted at the bartender, "You lie! You stood right there when I was walking away! You gave me warning."

THE MAN spoke suddenly with a hot lift to his tone. "I don't want to put the finger on nobody. I don't want to get mixed in this thing. You're alive and kicking, ain't you? You ain't lying there dead, with a slug in your back, are you? Just leave me alone. I didn't see nothing. You get out of it the best you can."

The Kid understood the trend of the man's talk. The barkeep did not want to live in fear, waiting for a sneak bullet from Smokey Woods. The Kid nodded toward the attentive, hard-faced outlaw. He put feeling into his words. "I'll see that gunny dead if he hounds you. I'll tell him, now, to walk soft. I'd track him into hell."

The bar-man shook his head, his moody expression returning. "I saw nothing," he repeated stubbornly. "Nothing."

Troubled uncertainty laced the Kid's dark cheeks. His gaze pulled across to Smokey Woods, reading the victory on that sharp-boned wolf-face.

Sheriff Maddock had a bored and unemotional attitude. "Well, this will be settled at the inquest," he said gruffly. "Tend to the body, Joe, will you? And get statements from Smokey and Rudy. All right, Sundown, move on out. I'll trail."

"You locking me up?" asked the Kid with chagrin in his tone.

"Sure," came the flat reply. "You want a medal or something?"

The Kid, gunless and somewhat bewildered, moved through the passage which the gather of spectators made. He shouldered through the swing doors and headed diagonally across the street. Maddock was a few yards behind him and he had the Kid's .44 tucked in his waistband.

They fronted the squat adobe jail building, and while crossing the street, a wicked flame of resentment had built in the Kid. It seemed that everything bad had happened to him since his release from prison. He felt as if he were being persecuted, pushed around, not only by the law, but by men with whom he had ridden in better days.

The Sundown Kid showing up in a town didn't appear to be important any longer. Younkers didn't stare at him with open-mouth wonder and town girls didn't saunter down main street to cast shy, furtive glances at the handsome, notorious Sundown Kid lounging in the shade of a wood awning. And that bar-dog, Rudy—seven, eight years ago he'd have drowned in his own sweat if he'd done anything that displeased the Sundown Kid.

"How about my horse?" the Kid asked as he started to climb the jail steps.

"I'll turn him to the stable later," the sheriff replied. "Open up."

The Kid laid his hand on the knob and, without turning the knob, shook the door. "You got this door locked," he stated.

"You're loco," said the sheriff. "Sometimes she sticks. Push it hard."

The Kid, making sure his body blocked off the lawman's view while rattling the doorknob, looked as if he were trying vigorously to push the door inward. "You got this door locked, old man," he said in

a natural, positive tone.

"Maybe. Might of locked it, not thinking. You stand well to one side, Kid."

The Kid stepped to his right and halfway turned. The sheriff stood there, watching the Kid out of wary old eyes, and he jerked his head for the Kid to get farther back. Then he moved toward the door. "No tricks, Sundown," he murmured.

The old lawman did not take his eyes from the Kid. He had his sixgun trained squarely on the Kid's chest. He reached out with his left hand and turned the knob, pushed the door gently inward. "After you," he offered sarcastically and began to fall back.

The Kid made a move for the doorway. Then he flashed into abrupt action, leaping at the startled old man. With a vicious curse he knocked the gun arm aside and pile-drived a fist to the point of Maddock's square jaw. The lawman hit the dust of the street on his back. The Kid was on top of him at almost the same instant.

The Kid jerked his own gun from the sheriff's waistband, slammed the muzzle against the old man's chest, ready to send that lawman to his final resting ground. But Maddock did not move. The Kid saw that he was out cold. He picked up the sheriff's gun and tossed it up onto the flat roof of the jail.

His eyes sparked with violence as his gaze swept up along the street. His nerves sang. A woman was watching him from the doorway of a store, her hand clasped to her mouth. Apparently, no one else had witnessed the action. Two or three men stood outside the saloon where his horse was hitched, but they were facing the saloon front, half-heartedly looking in through the batwings held open by other curious gents. The woman turned suddenly and went into the store.

THE BRIEF, ferocious altercation with Sheriff Maddock was a fuse that set off a crazy wildness within the Kid. The years of being penned up, waiting and expecting too much when he got out, and not finding it—the tension of this, added to the fact that he was no longer celebrated or famous, broke through and spilled over with malevolent revenge.

Jail the Sundown Kid because of some yellow coyote's lies? Sit on his fanny to wait for some righteous tribunal to decide whether he should be tried for killing a man who shot at his back? Not the Sundown Kid! They walked soft around him once, and he'd make them do it again!

He spat on the dusty street. His long legs broke into a lope as he headed back toward the saloon. One of the men lingering out front spied him and that man lifted a warning cry as he dove for cover. The others were as quickly gone.

The Kid, gun in hand, jumped to the walk and rammed his way into the interior. The clattering noise of men attempting to clear out of fire line shook the building to its rafters. The U. S. Marshal and Smokey Woods were seated at a table, where the marshal was taking down Smokey's statement. Both men were struck dumb as they saw the Kid loom up like a crouched panther.

The Kid yelled harshly, "Smokey Woods, you yellow snake!" And his gun bucked in his hand, lead cutting into the last of the Woods brothers as Smokey started his throw-down. The astonished gunny crashed to the floor, the Kid's bullets smashing the life out of him.

The marshal's gun spilled to the floor as a chance shot by the Kid broke that lawman's wrist. He had meant that slug for the marshal's guts, but the man had moved opportunely as he drew his gun, thereby inadvertently saving his skin. The Kid saw immediately that the marshal was out of the play for some moments, even though he was already searching for the gun that had been wrenched from his hand.

The Kid whirled then and saw the bartender, Rudy, racing for the back door of the saloon. He triggered one accurate shot. The bullet appeared to rip the top of the man's head off, blood and brains splattering against the door panel. He crumpled in a grotesque, back-bending

position against the door.

The Kid dashed from the saloon then and ran to his horse. As he swung up to saddle, a gunshot smashed the front window, the breath of the slug dangerously hot on the side of his neck. His pony reared. He raked fierce spurs into the hide of the animal and the horse jumped into its springy run. The Kid hunkered low over the horn.

He saw Sheriff Frank Maddock down the street rising unsteadily, and he swerved his course and bore straight down on the old lawman.

The Kid cut loose a wild Texas yell as his charging horse brushed close to the stumbling sheriff. Maddock plowed into a hitchrack, upending himself. The Kid, glancing over a shoulder, burst out with a scornful laugh that echoed back down the street. His pony's hoofbeats faded into the stillness.

He swung north to the old, rocky trail he had ridden years ago and used to enter Calabasas that very day. Many a "wet" Mexican steer had been herded north on the trail by him and his pardners, men like Bard Ringallis, Curley Young and Smokey and Bitter Woods.

A posse would take his trail, of this he was certain. But he had a good start, and could travel through country that would cause an Apache tracker eye-strain. And he knew his destination before many miles out of Calabasas.

There was an old abandoned ranch, completely isolated, back in the Running Horse Mountains northeast of Tombstone. The house up there was a sorry affair, but at least it would be a roof over his head until things cooled off some and he could plan his next move.

But he was almost broke. Somehow, that would have to be remedied before he holed himself up. He'd need grub—things like coffee, flour, a little sugar and salt. Meat was no problem; the ranches up there wouldn't miss a stray cow or two now and then. As for the other stuff, he had thought of a way of obtaining it without showing his face in any store in the Territory.

He figured Betty Lou Ringallis had been just about loco over him when he rode out of Tombstone. He didn't think he'd have much trouble bringing the girl around to his way of thinking. Hardly a night had passed that he didn't remember her taking a horseback ride about sundown, outside the town. He'd been on a few of those rides with her. It shouldn't be hard to come across her some evening, he thought.

That little reckless smile stirred his cheeks. It might not be so lonesome, after all. . . .

CHAPTER V

Bloody Sunset

THE Kid rode into Patagonia on a heat-shimmering morning. He was taking a chance on the local law not having been informed of his Calabasas escapade, but he kept a hawk-eye peeled along the boardwalks and alleys.

His stomach was growling from hunger pangs, and he turned in at the cafe's hitchrack. Inside that steamy joint, he wolfed down a quick meal, then hit the saddle again, anxious to be on his way out of the burg. Cantering through the town square, the Kid's eyes fell across a front window that had printed on it "Patagonia Bank."

His heart did a flip as the idea struck his mind. There was money in a bank and it was money he needed.

He slowed his pony to a walk and at the end of the street turned and rode back. He scanned the length of the bright lane again. It was empty except for the few horses at the mercantile rack. A faint, twisted grin stretched his thin mouth as he dismounted in front of the bank and sauntered lazily into the building.

Some minutes later he emerged to the street, cradling a canvas moneybag half-hidden against his side, that little grin still on his lips. He was in no hurry. The two

persons who had been inside at the time he entered, a teller and the banker, were in the back office, lying side by side on the floor. The Kid had chopped hard blows behind an ear of each man, then took his sweet time rifling the cashier's box.

He stashed the loot in his saddlebags and mounted. Swinging casually down the street, he saw a rider approaching. As they came abreast, the man said "Howdy," and the Kid nodded and returned the greeting. After riding on for some yards, the Kid angled his head and cast a glance back along the quiet street. The man had ridden on past the bank. The Kid's grin widened. He touched his pony to a fast canter, his thoughts moving ahead to Betty Lou and the deserted ranch in the Running Horse Mountains.

Three days later the Kid sat his horse in a red sunset among some tall rocks. He was a few miles outside of Tombstone, waiting for Betty Lou to bring the supplies he had asked her to fetch from town the previous evening. He had had to do some fancy talking to convince her.

His passionate denial that he held up the Patagonia bank was the convincer. The explanation he had given was simple and logical: "I'll be accused of every crime in the Territory now," he had told her. "Just because I gunned down some yellow backshooters in self-defense and then run out. . . ."

It had been a sound argument, and Betty Lou, gripped by a painful love for the Kid, had fallen for it.

The Kid watched the faint trail for a sign of the girl. Numerous brown-paper cigarette stubs lay on the sandy earth. The Kid smoked incessantly, getting a trifle spooky as he waited. Then he spotted a dust boil at the foot of the rocky slope, and later heard the crashing of shod hoofs on stone and rock.

Betty Lou rode her pony into the little open clearing from where the Kid had surprised her last evening as she trailed along the slope, out for her daily ride. She nudged her horse up alongside the Kid. He reached out for a slender hand, leaned down and kissed it gallantly.

HER soft cheeks were disturbed, and she turned her face away. The Kid laughed, a whispered laugh. He placed his fingers under her chin and brought the blushing face of the girl about gently. He gazed a long moment at the dark brown of her large, wistful eyes, at the full, shapely mouth; his eyes trailed to the smooth curve of her neck and the firm breasts stirring with the rise and fall of her breathing. A copper sheen glowed faintly about her hair in the reddish light of the dying sun.

"You got everything?" he murmured.

"Yes, it's all here in this sack."

He had noticed the bulky cloth sack behind her cantle. "Didn't forget shells and makings, did you, sweetheart?"

"No, Sundown," she said patiently. "I had everything written down."

He flashed one of his inimitable smiles, then murmured, "Let's set a spell."

They stepped from their saddles and left the ponies ground-hitched. For a long time they sat silently, watching the golden-red light spread across the barren reaches of the hot earth. When he placed his arm around her waist, she did not protest, but moved closer to him.

"I'll want to see you again real soon, Betty Lou," the Kid said. "How about three days from now, about this time."

She nodded. "I'll be here."

The Kid's arm tightened about her waist. "Maybe—maybe when I get that old shack in the Running Horse cleaned up—well, maybe you'll ride up with me some night and cook me a square meal—"

The girl sat up abruptly and her dark, soft eyes searched his face. "You know I wouldn't do that," she told him in hurt tones. "Why, Dad would have the whole Territory scoured if I didn't come home of a night. It was the wrong thing to have asked me, Sundown. Awfully wrong."

"And it's wrong for you to be out here with him now," a man's voice said.

An unintelligible oath burst from the Kid as he jumped the .44 from its holster and scrambled to his feet. He trained on a solid, bully figure standing wide-legged near the two horses. "Bard!"

"Yeah," the big man murmured tightly. "Your old pard, come to kill you!"

"Dad—no!" Betty Lou gasped, standing beside the Kid now. "How did you find us? How did you know?"

Ringallis kept his black, deadly stare on the Kid, but said to the girl, "I trailed you out. Charley Williams, the storekeeper, came to my place and asked me if I'd given up stogie smoking. Said my little girl was in his store and bought a heap of tobacco makings. The sign was mighty easy to read, girl. Now ride to home!"

"You don't understand!" the girl pleaded. "Sundown is alone and hunted. He killed those men in self defense, Dad. And he swears he didn't rob the Patagonia bank. You know, yourself, how they'll accuse him of any crime now."

Ringallis seemed not to hear his daughter. In a cutting voice he said to the Kid, "Sundown, you stepped clean over the line trying to drag my little girl down to hell. You're gonna die for that."

THE KID wavered a moment, a trapped look of indecision marring his handsome features. He took a short step forward. "Don't make me use this old gun, Bard," he rasped. "You ain't got a chance if you drag iron."

Ringallis stood there like a block of granite, obviously mulling the Kid's words. Then he said stonily, "All I need is one trigger. You'll get me first, but you won't live to brag of it."

The Kid's lips curled back from his teeth. "You won't clear leather before you're a praying dead man."

Betty Lou flung herself in front of the Kid, holding tight to his gun arm. "Don't shoot, either of you!" the girl yelled frantically. "Please, Dad! Do as he says!"

"Get away from me!" the Kid shouted with desperate urgency. "Don't hang to my arm that way!"

He gave her a violent shove, fighting to free his gun arm. The girl fell roughly to the ground, a groan tearing from her lips.

The Kid was half turned, swinging back to find balance when Bard Ringallis' Colt blasted lead, powder-flame and thunder. The big man thumbed and triggered as fast as his thick fingers could move.

Tiny spurts of dust jumped out from the Kid's flannel shirt as the slugs whunked into his body. Tight moans broke past his lips as each bullet smashed through his ribs. He got off one shot that kicked up a sand plume at Ringallis' booted feet. Then he slumped heavily to the earth, his face contorted in the effort to fight off death. Smoke curled from the muzzle of the yellow-handled gun where it lay just beyond the reach of his clawed, out-stretched fingers. The Sundown Kid was dead.

Betty Lou climbed stiffly to her knees, staring in horror at the still body of the Kid, her hands clenched at her sides.

"Look here, girl!" she heard her father's voice ring in her ears. "Look at this and think of his lies, his killer's heart and wild ways!" He had run to the Kid's frightened pony, rifled through the saddlebags and pulled out bank loot. He held the money up in a fist and shook it vigorously. "Bank loot!" Ringallis shouted roughly at his daughter. "Patagonia bank loot! Your Sundown Kid was nothing but a swelled-out cowpuncher who figured the world owed him a living!"

Betty Lou ran past her father and caught up her wild-eyed horse. She flung aboard and sent the pony galloping headlong down the slope.

Ringallis watched his daughter's dust line. Sweat glistened on his big face and his breathing was coarse. There was a sadness in him but at the same time a deep feeling of thankfulness. He peered down at the Kid.

Even now he felt no hatred or bitterness for the dead outlaw. Pity, yes—much pity. He had been like the Kid in many ways when he was younger. The only difference was that the Kid hadn't savvied when to hang up his gun. He had tried to live in a bygone era.

Ringallis got the Sundown Kid lashed to his pony, and in the last, soft light of the burning day, led the horse with its burden down to a stand of rocks where his own horse was hidden, to start the return trek to town. ● ● ●

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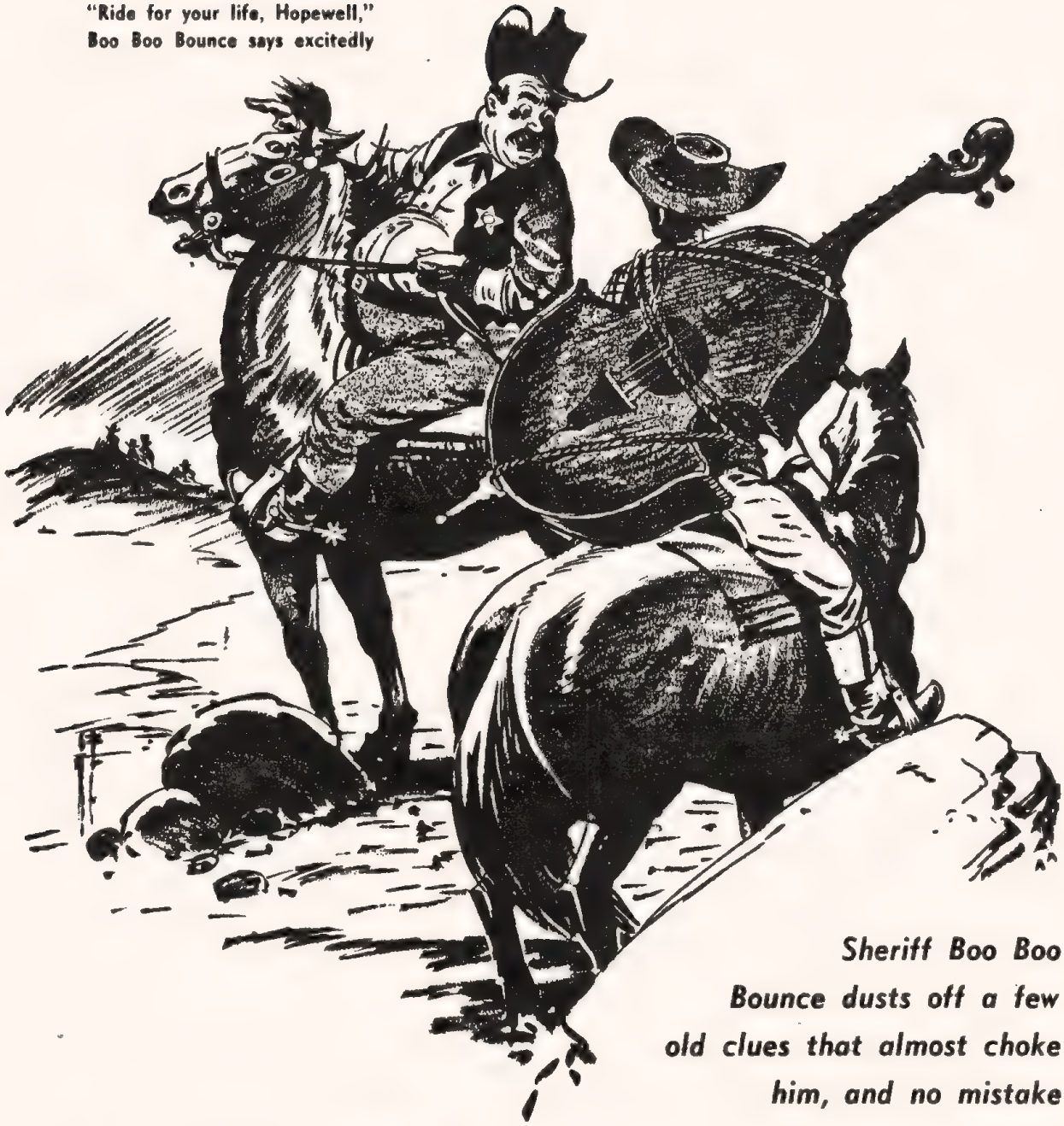

"Ride for your life, Hopewell," Boo Boo Bounce says excitedly

Sheriff Boo Boo Bounce dusts off a few old clues that almost choke him, and no mistake

THE GONE BULL FIDDLE

By BEN FRANK

I AM eating my breakfast hearty when of a sudden I think of something. The next thing you know, I am setting there with my appetite gone like smoke in a strong wind.

"Hopewell," my wife says, "what is the matter?"

"Nothing is the matter," I say with a slight shudder, "which is why I have lost my appetite. The horrible truth is, my dear, for the first time, I cannot think of a single thing in the wide world to worry me."

"Since everything is so hunky-dory,"

she says, scowling suspicious, "I cannot understand why you look so peaked."

"Any way you look at it," I explain, "it is not normal for such as I, the deputy sheriff of Coyote County, U.S.A., and working for such as Sheriff Boo Boo Bounce, to be without worries. So realizing this, I am worried."

"Hopewell," she says, "married to you, a man who works for a big fat no-good Boo Boo Bounce, I should be worried to death myself. But I wasn't the least bit worried this morning until now, when I am worried because I wasn't worried."

"Exactly," I murmur. "And feeling as I do, I believe I will go back to bed and spend the day."

"No!" she says positive. "You will go to work as usual, and if you and Boo Boo can't stir up something to worry about that will stop you from worrying because you have no worries, I will be surprised."

Not being one to argue with my wife, I put on my hat and depart. Outside, the sun is shining pleasant, and the birds are singing chipper. But worrying utmostly because I have nothing to worry about, I scarcely notice what a fine day it is. Shivering with a unknown dread, I head along the one street of Polecat.

Coming to the mayor's office, who should I see but Mayor Mince-meat Malone standing in the doorway, smiling carefree and twirling his red handle-bar mustache.

"Hopewell," he cries gaily, "I can't recall the day when I felt happier! Our fair city is flourishing. The sky never looked bluer. Also, I—Hopewell, why are you shaking your head and looking no less grimmer than a ghost?"

"Worries," I answer mournful.

HE ASKS, frowning, "What are you worried about?"

"I am worried because I cannot think of a single thing to worry about," I tell him, hollow-voiced.

"Come to think of it," he says, glancing about uneasy, "it is peculiar-funny that I have nothing to worry about, also. It kind of gives me the creeps, Hopewell."

"That is the exact way I feel," I say with a shiver.

"Hopewell," he says hoarsely, "maybe if I get busy, I can figure out a few-odd worries to avoid this great calamity of having nothing to worry about."

His thin face somewhat pale, he goes into his office and shuts and locks the door no little hurriedly.

Feeling more worried than previous, I go on toward the post office, but at the corner who should I meet but Old Man Bundy, who is our mortal enemy. Him printing the *Polecat News,* and being of opposite views of our political party, he is forever causing as much trouble as possible, especially for Boo Boo and I, hoping to convince the voters it is time for a change in Coyote County. But this morning, he is smiling friendly.

"Fine day, Deputy," he says. "I suppose everything is going along very well at the sheriff's office and there is no dirt I can dig up about you and that fat, chair-warming sheriff? Heh, heh! Or—Deputy, you look worried. Is there an outlaw in Coyote County, or has Boo Boo got more rocks than usual in his head?"

"Everything is fine," I say quickly. And before he can ask further questions, I hurry on to the post office.

Mailman Moffett, who next to Boo Boo is the fattest man in Coyote County, is behind his window, smiling a welcome.

"No mail for you this morning, Deputy," he says. "Since no news is good news, I reckon you got nothing to worry about, or—Say, what is the matter with you?"

I explain now I am worried no little on account of having nothing to worry about, and see his face pucker into a scowl.

"Now that you have mentioned it," he says unsteady, "it does seem strange indeed to not have no worries, and I—But on second thought, Hopewell, I am able to scare up a worry or two. For example, I can worry about Six-horse Hanson being robbed while he is driving the mail stage to and fro from Red Dog to Polecat."

"But there is no outlaw around and about."

"One could come," he says, smiling cheerful. "For example, that two-gun

sidewinder, Tombstone Tucker."

I snort with disdain, for Tombstone Tucker has not been heard of or seen in Coyote County for a long time. But saying nothing, I go on. Coming to the jail, I tiptoe cautious into the office, thinking Boo Boo may be taking his morning nap. But one look at him setting in his chair tells me he is not asleep, even though he has his eyes shut, for he is not snoring and has a pleasant smile upon his round, pink face.

"Is that you, Deputy?" he asks, not opening his eyes.

"Yes, indeed," I tell him.

"Then set down and maintain a very quiet quiet whilst I continue to meditate upon life being a very fine bed of roses this delightful morning."

I find a chair and set down.

"Deputy," he says, "we are utmostly lucky, and no mistake, to be guardians of the law in Polecat and vicinity, rather than in our neighboring city of Northfork."

"How is that so?" I inquire.

"Running acrost last week's *Northfork News,* I see there was a diamond robbery. Polecat having no jewelry store, we need never worry about a diamond robbery. In fact, I cannot think of one single thing to worry about. Having et numerous flapjacks plus a slice of apple pie with whipped cream, I am not hungry. No one has broke the law recently. I have a hundred smackeroos saved against a rainy day. Yes, indeed, Hopewell, our blessings are numerous, and then some."

"That is what worries me," I say gloomily.

HE OPENS one eye to look at me; then pops the other open for a better look.

"Deputy," he gurgles, "what is the matter with you?"

"Worry," I tell him. "Setting at the breakfast table, it struck me like a bolt out of the blue that I couldn't think of one single thing to worry about."

"Kindly continue," he says, frowning slightly.

"So I got to worrying over the fact I had no worries. The more I thought about it, the worrieder I—"

But he stops me with a waggle of one fat thumb.

"Leave me get this straight," he says, scowling fierce. "In short, having no worries, you are worried about having nothing to worry about?"

"That is exactly right," I say.

For a few minutes, he sets very still, his fat red face and his three chins puckered in deep thought. Then of a sudden, he blinks rapid, gives his thumbs a quick, nervous twirl and sucks in a sharp breath.

"You are right, Deputy!" he says hoarsely.

Shoving to his feet, he waddles across the room and back, his eyes staring, his face losing color by the second.

"This is terrible!" he croaks. "Hopewell, you have got to help me, or I will go plumb loco, worrying like this because I have got nothing to worry about!"

"If you could think of something to worry about," I say, "then you wouldn't have to worry about having no worries."

"Hopewell," he says, setting down again, "without your help and advice, I don't know what I'd do. Leave me rummage around and see if I can stir up a worry. Politics—no. Old Man Bundy—he ain't printed any dirt about me all summer. Outlaws—none. Oh, oh! There is Miss Twilly, who has come here to teach the school next winter! Deputy, I saw her giving me the eye only yesterday. She even turned around to look at me a second time!"

"Maybe she had never saw a sheriff so fat."

"Deputy," he yells, pounding a fist on his desk, "do you mean to set there and tell me I don't recognize the husband-hunting gleam in a old maid's eyes when I see it? That woman is out to ruin my peaceful bachelor existence, and no mistake!"

"But—"

"No buts!" he roars, shaking a finger at me. "On your feet, Deputy, and do something about keeping Miss Twilly from

latching onto me for better or worse!"

"Leave everything to me," I say soothingly and put on my hat.

I go outside and head down the street toward the rooming house where at Miss Twilly lives, but before I get there, I meet Forgetful Finnegan, carrying a string of catfish and looking no little happy and content.

"Hopewell," he says, "I never saw the fish biting so rapid in Skunk Creek as they have did this morning. If I hadn't of forgot where I put my bait can—Hopewell, how come you are going about with a face as long as a post?"

I explain, and he scratches his head and frowns perplexed.

"No doubt you are right," he says, "but I will have to ponder the matter further before I can get thoroughly worried because I ain't got nothing to worry me."

Scowling, he stumbles on along the street. I go on and am lucky enough to find Miss Twilly setting in the shade of her front porch, tatting, school having not yet begun until next week.

"Good morning, Deputy," she says with a flutter of eyes.

Seeing her close up, I cannot help but think what a catastrophe it would be for anybody, even Boo Boo, to be married to her, having to gaze upon her face morning, noon and night.

I TIP my hat polite and say, "It would be a good morning, Miss Twilly, if I did not work for Sheriff Boo Boo Bounce."

"What do you mean?" she asks, looking astounded.

"Between you and I," I whisper, "Boo Boo is no-good bum who ought to be rid out of town on a rail. He is untruthful, unscrupulous and has no more principle than a rattlesnake. No nice girl like you would ever speak to him. Well, I have got to be going to do the work Boo Boo should do, but won't do, because he is so fat and lazy."

Saying a sad farewell, I wander on along the street and circle back around the courthouse toward the office. On the way, I pass the Polecat Hotel, and there is Latch-string Lacy standing in the doorway, looking untroubled.

"Hopewell," he says, staring at me, "you look like you've lost all your money and relatives at the same time."

I stop to tell him about my worry. Then I start to go on, but he stops me with, "Hopewell, come to think of it, I am lucky enough to have something to worry about. One of my guests departed a few days ago without paying his bill, leaving instead his bass viol, him being a traveling musician out of work, and saying that as soon as he borrowed the room rent, he would return for said instrument."

"Why does that worry you?" I inquire.

"Who knows," Latch-string says, scowling, "this Beethoven Burtz might sneak into my hotel and cabbage onto his fiddle without paying me what he owes. Therefore, you will help me carry said security over to the jail for Boo Boo to lock up safe in a cell."

The next thing I know, I am helping him carry a wooden box the size of a coffin, only shaped somewhat like a ordinary fiddle, in which is this Beethoven Burtz' bass viol. Upon entering the office, Latch-string explains his dilemma to Boo Boo.

"A jail is for humans, not for over-sized fiddles," Boo Boo says, irritated. "Kindly tote that thing out of here."

"Now, looky, Boo Boo," Latch-string says, indignant, "I am a taxpayer and a voter and demand protection!"

Not wanting to lose Latch-string's vote, Boo Boo agrees to lock the fiddle up in cell number one.

It is in the afternoon that Boo Boo and I take a look at the bass viol out of curiosity and find it a shiny red like new. Frowning, Boo Boo shuts the wooden case with a nervous slam.

"I don't precisely like it," he says, "being jailer to a bull fiddle. If Old Man Bundy ever hears about this, he'll—"

At that moment, the door flies open, and in pops Grandma Grinder, who is a old lady about the size of a sawed-off fencepost, with a scowl on her brow.

"Sheriff," she says grimly, "after talking with Mailman Moffett, I got to worrying because I had no worries. So to find a worry, I went home and counted my chickens. Sure enough, two are missing. Come alive, Boo Boo, and go arrest the culprit."

Boo Boo sighs and says, "Deputy, go arrest the culprit."

I put on my hat and go to No-work Norton's shack, for he is the only Polecatter who steals chickens. Sure enough, there are some feathers lying about, and No-work himself is setting in the shade, looking content and well-fed.

"What?" he yells, jumping to his feet. "Can't Boo Boo wait till after the fishing season's over. Look, Hopewell, I got a pocketful of new fish lines and hooks and—"

"No," I say firmly and take him back to the jail with me.

"Boo Boo," he says, "ordinarily I am not a revengeful man. But this is going too far, chucking me in the clink during catfishing season! So I will get even with you someway, or—"

"Lock him in Cell Number Two," Boo Boo says, stern.

Ignoring No-work's ungentlemanly language, I shove him into Cell Number Two and lock the barred door. When I step back into the office, I see we have visitors —namely, Mayor Mincemeat Malone and Judge Jackson, our party leaders, and both looking at Boo Boo as if he was a bad case of smallpox.

THE mayor is saying wrathfully, "It is like this, Boo Boo. Unable to think up anything to worry about, I went to talk it over with the judge. Right away he helped me."

"Yes, indeed," Judge Jackson says, tapping his gold-headed cane bangy against the floor. "Boo Boo, it has come to my attention that none other than our new school teacher, Miss Twilly, has discovered already that you are a lazy, no-good sheriff. What is worse, she is telling everybody this truth."

Paling somewhat, Boo Boo swallows audible. Then he takes one quick look at me, and the blood rushes back to his face.

"Gentlemen," he says, "I believe I know the source of Miss Twilly's information. Therefore, leave me add that I will see to it personally that this gossip shall cease."

"If it don't cease," the judge says, poking Boo Boo in the stomach with his cane, "you will find yourself out in the cold, politically speaking!"

With that, the mayor and the judge depart, leaving me alone with Boo Boo and wishing I was elsewhere.

"Hopewell," he says, his chins quivering violently, "either undo the damage you and Miss Twilly have did, or consider yourself no longer the deputy sheriff of Coyote County, and no mistake!"

I pick up my hat and hurry out. And who should I meet but Forgetful Finnegan, still carrying his string of catfish, his face wrinkled up with a great frown.

"Hopewell," he says, "I have pondered over what you said about worrying. Although I have forgot precisely what it was you said and can't recall why I am so worried, I figure it is time to lay my troubles at the feet of our sheriff. Is he in?"

"Yes," I answer and hurry on.

Again I find Miss Twilly setting in the shade, tatting. Seeing me, she smiles hopeful and says, "Deputy, have you come to tell me more scandal about our terrible sheriff?"

"Heh, heh," I chuckle humorously. "You see, Miss Twilly, it is the custom of us native Polecatters to make little jokes about our outstanding community leaders to newcomers such as you. Then after we have had our little laugh, we always return to tell the truth."

"Oh, no!" she says, lifting a hand to her throat.

"The truth is, Miss Twilly, Boo Boo Bounce is a fine man, with a heart of gold. Brave, loyal and true from toe to head. Maybe I shouldn't tell you, but he is no little taken with you."

"Oh, dear me!" she says, horrified. "Believing your joke, I told the landlady and a few others what you said. Do you sup-

pose Mr. Bounce will ever forgive me?"

"Of course," I say. "Incidental, if you would care to hurry things along, you might go about, telling folks you were mistaken and that he is not a no-good bum."

I tip my hat again and return to the jail office. Boo Boo is pacing about like a bear in a cage, his face pale, his eyes bugging.

"Worry, worry, worry!" he mumbles, beating his hands together. "And to think when the day started, I didn't have a worry in the wide world. Then you came to work, Deputy, and—Could it be you are the cause of all my trouble?"

Seeing it is time to go home, I do so. But I would have been just as well off to stay at the jail, for my wife meets me at the door, scowling fiercely.

"Hopewell," she says, "after you left this morning, I started to look for something to worry about. At last, I have found it. You and that new schoolma'am, Miss Twilling. According to gossip, you have went to see her twice today."

That night, I am so worried I hardly sleep a wink.

The next morning, things are worse than previous. My wife refuses to get my breakfast, and Boo Boo Bounce is harder to get along with than a bobcat with bunions. Also, No-work Norton is in a nasty frame of mind, and when I take his breakfast to him, he is very insulting about being locked neighbor to a bass fiddle instead of going fishing.

NO SOONER do I get set down to rest a minute when Latch-string Lacy comes in to look at the bass fiddle case laying in the middle of Cell Number One.

"I see it is still there," he says.

"Of course!" Boo Boo yells. "And leave me add that I, Sheriff Boo Boo Bounce, has never yet lost a prisoner!"

"All right, all right," Latch-string says. "You don't have to bust your boiler, do you?"

Snorting, he walks out.

"Worry, worry, worry!" Boo Boo wails again, waddling about. "I wish—Hopewell, take this key and go unlock Cell Number One and bring in Latch-string's bull fiddle. I have a sudden odd feeling about that contraption."

I do as he says. No-work Norton, I see, is snoring peaceful in his cell, which is much better than hearing him complain. So I tiptoe back to Boo Boo and open the wooden case.

For a minute, we stare speechless. Then Boo Boo whispers faintly, "It is gone, Deputy!"

Not being able to believe my own eyes that the bass viol is gone, I feel around inside the case with both hands. But there is nothing whatsoever to feel. For once, I am struck speechless, but not Boo Boo.

"This is a pretty howdy-do!" Boo Boo says again, waddling about. "If old Bundy ever hears of a bull fiddle disappearing from my jail, he will make me the laughing stock of Coyote County. And Latch-string Lacy will raise a stink that can be smelled from here to—Hopewell, nobody must ever know about this. Return the case to the cell as if nothing is missing and lock it up tight. Oh why oh why didn't I stay in my office last night instead of going home to sleep."

I do as he says, and No-Work is setting up, yawning.

"No-work," I ask, "was you disturbed any last night?"

"Nope," he answers. "Slept like a baby. Why?"

"Merely curious," I say, and go back to the office no little baffled.

"Deputy," Boo Boo says, "there is but one thing to do—ride to Northfork and buy a similar bull fiddle to put in that empty case."

"But," I say, "the citizens will see us returning and will be curious."

"We will return late at night when all, including No-work, are asleep and— Oh, oh, could No-work have done this in revenge because I locked him up during catfish season?" and he goes on, shaking his head.

"Impossible, firstly, he could not reach the case. Secondly, he could not get the fiddle out between the bars. Thirdly, there is no place he could hide a six-foot

fiddle in his cell. And I had the only key to Cell Number One in my pocket all night. It is uncanny, and no mistake, how—"

But he is cut short by the opening of the outside door. Walking clompy on his peg-leg, old Six-horse Hanson, the Red Dog stage driver, comes in.

"Sheriff," he roars, "Mailman Moffett has got me a-feared that Tombstone Tucker will come back to Coyote County and rob the stage! Therefore—"

"Never fear," Boo Boo says with a brave twirl of his thumbs. "I will keep my eyes open."

"It will take more than keeping your eyes open, Boo Boo. You will have to get your fat carcass off'n that chair and get busy."

"Six-horse," Boo Boo says, furious, "leave me say—"

But Six-horse has departed with an angry snap of his store teeth and a window-rattling slam of the door.

Hardly has he gone when the door opens again, and Old Man Beasley, owner of the Lazy B, rushes in, all excited.

"Boo Boo," he wheezes, "I hear that Tombstone Tucker is back. As a voter and owner of numerous stealable cattle, I have come to tell you to get busy running that danged coyote down, or I will agree with Mr. Bundy that you are unfit to be sheriff."

BOO BOO says, dignified, "Sir, leave me say that my deputy and I are just about to saddle our mounts and scour the countryside, regardless of danger, to protect your property."

Looking somewhat less grim, Beasley leaves us.

"Boo Boo," I say, feeling numerous chills, "you don't think Tombstone Tucker is around and about, do you?"

"Certainly not," he answers, slapping his hat on over his pink bald head. "Riding out to look for him will give us a chance to go to Northfork for a bull fiddle."

But first, we go to Stinky Joe's and eat our dinner. Stepping outside again, we come face to face with Miss Twilly

"Sheriff Bounce," she says gushy, "what an unexpected pleasure! Just this morning, I was telling my landlady what a fine brave and loyal man you are."

Glancing at Boo Boo, I see a shudder move among his three chins. Not stopping to talk, we hasten back to the jail barn for our horses. Knowing that he is near the breaking point, I offer no comments, but saddle his horse and mine and boost him up, him being too awkward to climb by himself upon a horse. In gloomy silence, we ride from town and circle around to the Northfork trail.

At the music store in Northfork, we are lucky to find a red bass fiddle that appears similar to the one that has vanished. Looking no little unhappy, Boo Boo forks over his hundred smackeroos, and we tote the fiddle out to our horses.

"How," I ask, "are we going to get this thing to Polecat?"

"I will show you how," he says grimly.

The next thing I know, he has tied me and the fiddle together with a lariat.

"When you get to Polecat," he says, "so will the fiddle."

As we ride homeward, darkness falls fast, and by the time we reach the Lazy B range, you can hardly see ten feet ahead. Just as we approach Skunk Creek, what should happen but a bunch of night riders top a hill and come charging toward us, yelling like fury.

"Ride for your life, Hopewell!" Boo Boo says.

At that moment, guns roar and bullets skim overhead. For a time I see no chance of getting away, with a bass viol tied to me. But for some reason, the night riders fail to keep up the chase, and Boo Boo and I escape.

"Tombstone Tucker don't often give up so easy," Boo Boo says between chattering teeth. "I guess he didn't want to tire his horses, or something."

Having no comment to make, I make none.

It is after midnight when we sneak into the jail. No-work is snoring a gentle basso in his cell. Without disturbing him, we put the new fiddle into the case and again

lock it up very careful.

"Tonight," Boo Boo says, "I am not going to stir one step outside my jail."

No little weary, I go home. But again, there is little rest for me, since my wife is waiting up till I get home.

"Hopewell," she says, "if you have been out hanging around with this Miss Twilly, you are in for trouble!"

I explain we have been looking for rustlers, which she does not quite believe.

The first thing I notice the next morning when I go to the jail is the very unsavory odor filling the air.

"Boo Boo," I say aghast, "what is this horrible smell?"

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He is setting at his desk, his three chins trembling, his round fat face somewhat a pale greenish color.

"I don't know," he answers. "At first, I thought maybe No-work Norton passed on to his reward, but he is wide awake and hollering about the smell, also. I have been waiting for you to come and take a look around and about."

But the door opens, and Latch-string Lacy walks in, followed by a thin old gent with long white hair, dressed in a black store suit.

LATCH-STRING says, "Boo Boo, this is Beethoven Burtz, who having paid me the room rent, now wants his fiddle and— What do I smell? Some newfangled perfume to attract Miss Twilly? Heh, heh!"

"Latch-string," Boo Boo roars, "leave me say that I would not smell thusly for Miss Twilly nor nobody! And for two cents, I would punch you on the nose!"

"Just joking, Sheriff," Latch-string says hastily.

Scowling, Boo Boo hands me the key to Cell Number One, and I go fetch the bass viol to the office.

"Gents," No-work calls from his cell, "never having had the pleasure of beholding a bass fiddle, would you allow me a glimpse of it?"

Boo Boo hands me another key, and I go release No-work.

Smiling proud, Beethoven Burtz opens the big wooden case, exposing the shiny red fiddle for one and all to see. That is when I hear No-work suck in a sharp breath and am surprised at the way his eyes are bugging. Without a thank you, he goes stumbling back to his cell.

Beethoven Burtz closes the case, and he and Latch-string depart. Having nothing else to do, I wander around, wondering what is smelling up the jail. Presently glancing into Cell Number Two, I see No-work setting on his bunk, still staring bug-eyed.

"Hopewell," he says, sticking a arm out between the bars, "kindly pinch me to see if I am awake."

I do so, and he hollers, "Ouch! I sure ain't dreaming, but—"

Hearing the front door open, I hasten back into the office. Old Man Beasley of the Lazy B has come in.

"Sheriff," he yells, "last night the boys and I was guarding our range and two rustlers came riding along! Believe it or not, it looked like one had a steer tied to his back. Fearing they was Tombstone

Tucker and his man, we didn't try to catch 'em, knowing this was your job."

"Mr. Beasley," Boo Boo says, "rest assured, I and my trusty deputy will look after Tombstone Tucker, or any other desperado that comes to Coyote County."

After Beasley has gone, Boo Boo says, "Deputy, I can't remember the day when things looked blacker." Of a sudden, he pounds a fist on the desk very bangy. "On your feet, Deputy, and do something!"

To satisfy him, I wander about the room, pretending to be doing something.

"Leave us go and try to eat," he says presently.

Anyway you look at it, dinner is not a success, for who should be already eating at Stinky Joe's but Miss Twilly, rolling her eyes at Boo Boo and spoiling his appetite. Then who should come in but Mayor Mince-meat Malone and Judge Jackson, glaring at Boo Boo very unfriendly.

And behind them comes Mailman Moffett and Old Man Bundy, editor of the *Polecat News*.

"Boo Boo," Mailman says, "the stage is late, which leads me to wonder if Tombstone Tucker has held it up. Therefore, if you was on the ball, you'd be out making a investigation."

"Come, Deputy," Boo Boo says, "leave us go investigate."

Walking up to the office door, Boo Boo growls, "I'd druther smell the jail than be around old Bundy. Also, did you see the way Miss Twilly looked at me?"

Opening the office door for him, I say, "Cheer up, Boo Boo. Nothing is so bad it can't be worse."

"How right you are, Deputy!" a harsh voice says.

LOOKING up, who should we see but Tombstone Tucker himself, leaning against Boo Boo's desk, with a sixgun in his fist. Beside him, looking no less grim beneath his long white hair, is Beethoven Burtz.

"Boo Boo," Tombstone says gritty, "I am mad enough to fill you so full of lead it would take nineteen pallbearers to carry you to your grave. Somebody has switched bass fiddles with my partner, Slick-finger Fink, who fearing he was being trailed, left it with Latch-string Lacy a few days ago. We have come here to find out if you know where the original fiddle is at?"

"And we don't want no funny answers!" Slick-finger, or Beethoven Burtz, says.

Boo Boo is too scared to talk. Me also, but I observe none other than No-work Norton, who I forgot to lock up, sneaking up behind the two desperados, with a strange-looking club in his hands.

So I say, "Would you kindly explain further, Tombstone?"

But at that instant, No-work whams him over the head, not only knocking him cold, but also breaking the club, which is nothing more nor less than the neck of a bass viol. And in a hollowed-out place in the broken neck, we find a leather pouch filled with numerous, very glittery diamonds.

"The Northfork jewel loot!" I exclaim.

"No-work," Boo Boo gurgles, "how, where—"

"Wanting to get even with you, Boo Boo," No-work explains, "I used my fishing line and a hook to pull that fiddle box to where at I could reach it through the bars. Not being able to get the fiddle betwixt the bars, I busted it into small pieces and hid 'em under my mattress. Then I took the neck and shoved the wooden case back into the middle of the cell out of reach. Honest, I didn't know them jewels was in the neck until I busted it over this skunk's head."

"Friend No-Work," Boo Boo says huskily, "kindly consider yourself a free man, and never again will I lock you up during catfish season."

That is when Slick-finger Fink sneaks out the door.

"Don't let him get away!" Boo Boo yells.

We rush outside, but Slick-finger is gone.

"Deputy," Boo Boo says, frantic, "leave us mount and ride after the coyote!"

But at that moment, the stage comes rattling into town, and we take out time to investigate why it is so late.

"Why?" old Six-horse Hanson yells. "I sneezed out my false teeth, that's why, and had to stop and look for 'em."

Snorting disgusted, Boo Boo and I hurry back to mount our horses, but hearing a strange gagging sound under the front porch, we stop. Looking beneath the porch, I see Slick-finger hiding. Grabbing a foot, I pull him out, and what should he have got tangled up with but a string of very dead catfish, smelling utmostly smelly, and then some.

"Oh, oh!" Forgetful Finnegan says, stepping up. "The other day when I got to worrying so much because I had no worries and went to ask your advice, Boo Boo, I put them fish under there and forgot where I left 'em."

For Boo Boo Bounce, this is the last straw.

"Never, never leave me hear anybody say anything about worrying because he has no worries!"

And with a great bellow of rage, he grabs up the string of ripe fish and flings them at Forgetful.

But Forgetful ducks and the fish sail over his head, landing at the feet of none other than Miss Twilly, who has hurried around the corner of the jail to see why there is so much commotion.

FOR a moment she stands there, staring first at the fish and then at Boo Boo. Then with a unladylike snort, she says furious, "No big fat sheriff, no matter if he is brave, loyal and true, can throw dead fish at me!" And before Boo Boo can dodge into the jail office, she has swatted him over the head with the string of fish. . . .

It is some time later when Boo Boo and I are setting in the jail office alone, resting, that he opens one eye and says, "Although it is your fault, Deputy, that I smell somewhat like a over-ripe dead fish and am worn to a frazzle, I must admit things turned out for the best, including the capture of two outlaws, plus Miss Twilly no longer looking favorable upon me as a possible husband. Therefore, leave me express my gratitude by giving you a ten per cent interest in yon bull fiddle, which you may return to the music store and sell back for whatever sum you can get."

Thanking him, I sling the bass viol over a shoulder and go out to where at I have left my horse, thinking how fortunate I am to work for a fine, brave, loyal and true man such as Sheriff Boo Boo Bounce.

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Dalles smashed his fist into Haines' face

Deed to Disaster

By AL STORM

A high-priced gunman was a fool to fight for free, Bob Dalles thought — particularly when it could cost him his life to boot

THEY had kept to the hills that edged the wide valley. Not furtive in their riding exactly, but not openly following it, either. Now, with the manzanita growth thinning to a half-screened opening atop the ridge, Bob Dalles reined in.

Below, the long sweep of open bottom still cut its swath through the brushy foothills. But here a jumble of sun-bleached buildings marked the location of

the town, and railroad rails lifted hair-thin lines of refraction.

Leaning forward in the saddle, Dalles stretched his legs. In full sunlight and summer's heat the sight below was pretty enough to soften the fibers of the most calloused conscience. Until a man remembered that it was, in truth, a battle ground. Then the beauty faded before more prosaic features which a fighting man did well to consider.

"Rifle country," Dalles decided aloud. "A man'll earn his pay."

The comment drew no reply, and he turned to grin at the morose features of his taciturn, hawk-nosed saddle pard.

"Cheer up, Red," he advised. "You may live through this fracas yet."

Red Herrick did not answer.

Dalles hipped around to study the town of Meadville. Buildings and streets, and roads that were tawny bits of dirty string fraying out from the town's edge. Then dusty flatlands that reached across to the dark folded foothills.

Somewhere in those hills lay the Rafter 7 for which they had ridden so far. A strange outfit whose need for fighting men was being whispered through the shadowy byways of lower California. "See John Lambert," the word went. And so they had come to see John Lambert. A few hours, or a day or two, and their guns would be backing the Rafter 7 cause, whatever that might be.

"Might be something good," Dalles said.

Herrick gigged his mare and rode past to begin a careful descent of the slope, twisting around the manzanita thickets, solemn and concentrated despite the early heat. Dalles laughed.

This morose foreboding of Herrick's either amused or annoyed, but never touched him. With a sun warm on his shoulders and a belly comfortably full, Dalles lived only from the present. Past and future were aspects of living he never considered. If a thing were to come, he'd meet it when it got to him. Not before. And once it was past, it was forever gone.

But Herrick—

A MULE deer sprang into motion, whipping away and into cover with almost soundless speed. Both men froze, hands shuttling toward their thighs, eyes becoming narrowed and alert. A moment's breathless interval, then Bob Dalles dropped his hand and swore.

"A bad thing," Herrick muttered. "Like a man had a price on his head. Jumping at every sound, watching every man who cuts behind him."

A flare of irritation followed the ease-off of tension and touched Dalles with anger. He snapped, "It's a living!"

Herrick snorted, "For how long? And how good? I been in two range wars and half a dozen small fracases. And I rode out with pockets just as empty as when I rode in. Twice I been shot down. Always I been hunted like some damned outlaw. Only I never got a chance to strike it rich and retire like an outlaw might."

"Then quit, damn it! Hang up your guns and go back to chousing cows at twenty a month! You ain't signed up with John Lambert yet!"

Again Herrick did not answer.

Dalles glared. Then, the edge of his anger burning itself away, he grinned. "There's a railroad hits Meadville," he said. "Hold 'er up, Red. Maybe your stake is riding one of those fancy painted cars."

Herrick grunted disconsolately, "Maybe."

The sun was two hours high before they emerged from the brushy slopes. It was noon by time they reached the dusty flats below town. From force of habit Dalles cut in ahead of Herrick and they rode single file into Meadville, riding slow and easy, each man measuring the town for whatever that memory might contribute to a later contingency.

The few pepper trees shading yellow-grassed yards. Half a dozen side streets that began straight and brave only to waver and be swallowed by the open country. The northern rim of town was marked by a squat, faded depot, beyond

which was nothing.

Dalles' glance covered it all in half a moment. He saw no people, heard no sound.

"Deader'n my Aunt Harriet," he grumbled. "But she's a town. Rein in, Red. We'll settle around a few beers and see how things shape."

Wordlessly, Red Herrick wheeled in at a hitch-rail and slid out of saddle, a skinny, weathered, somber man who carried the woes of mankind upon his slumped high-boned shoulders. Though the same age as Dalles, he seemed fifteen years Bob's senior. He looked up and shook his head.

"She's too quiet," he said uneasily. "Like maybe they was expecting trouble."

The mood touched Dalles and sobered him. He twisted in saddle to stare along the street. One hand touched his Remington, lifted it, and let it slide back into the holster.

"We're still free men, Red," he said quietly. "Ain't nobody hired me yet, and I ain't fighting for free. So I reckon it ain't none of my business—"

He stopped, attention caught by a furtive motion along the edge of a hotel veranda across the street and half a block down. A man stood close against the weathered clapboards of the frame building. While Dalles watched, the man peered both ways along the street, then began a hurried shuffle through the deep yellow dust of the road.

"Forcing himself to walk when he feels like running," Herrick observed softly. "There's trouble piled belly-deep here already. Better we get inside somewhere, before it busts and catches us out in the open."

The advice was sound, and Dalles dismounted. Something about the desperate, almost pathetic figure of the man hurrying across the road kept gnawing at his mind. He slanted a glance across his shoulder, narrowing his eyes against the brilliant glare of sunlight. And then, suddenly, he knew the man.

"Hell!" he exclaimed, and stepped around his horse to intercept him.

The stranger stopped, hand held carefully away from the sixgun at his thigh.

"Jasper!" Dalles called. "Jasper Haines! Hell, man, don't you remember me? We wintered with the Hashknife outfit back in Eighty-three. You pulled me out of that tight in Tuscorosa—"

FOR a moment the man he called Haines stood unmoving. Then he shoved out his hand. An older, thicker-boned man than Dalles. Wearing mustaches and a graying brush of uncut curly hair across his ears and low along the red leather parchment of his neck.

Dalles wrung the hand, laughed, and clapped him on the shoulder. "It's sure good to see you, Jas! Remember when we got those horse wranglers buffaloed at Mike's that time? We—"

Some measure of Jasper Haines' depression smothered Dalles' exuberance, and he broke off. He looked at this old-time partner for a time, then said gently:

"How's it been, Jas?"

Haines shrugged. His glance flitted away to search along the street doorways, the narrow clefts of space between the buildings, reaching out finally to comb across the flatlands beyond the town.

"Got to run, Dalles," he said suddenly. "Got a wife and her kid sister back there in the hotel. They ain't eaten since . . . Well, it's been good seeing you."

A coldness sifted across Bob Dalles' eyes. This was the man whose cold nerve and ready gun had saved his life in a saloon brawl in Tuscorosa. This was the man who had shared coffee and soogans with a jobless kid called Dalles when his luck was sour.

Something far back in Dalles' life stirred, and bridged the gap of time. He grasped Haines' arm and held him, searching the man's face with growing awareness of the haggard lines, the pinched, beaten turn of mouth.

"Can I help, Jas?"

Jasper Haines flushed. His glance wavered, then lifted in mute, pleading misery.

"I never ran from a man or a fight in my life before," he said huskily. "You

know that, Dalles. But now I'm tucking tail and running. Whipped. All I want is to get Emily out of Meadville before hell breaks loose."

Dalles dropped his hand. A beaten man is a bad thing to see, a spectacle that rises up in a man's thoughts and won't stay buried. And when that beaten man is a friend—

"Maybe we can work something out," he offered. "I picked up a fighting saddle pard some months back. He's been grumbling about signing on with the Rafter Seven, so he'll probably jump at the chance to work somewheres else . . . What the hell is wrong, Jas?"

"You rode in to join Lambert's crew of gunnies?"

Dalles nodded. Haines' sagging features hardened and lost their friendliness.

"I thought you knew," Dalles said. "I been peddling my gun since a long time now."

"It's Lambert and his Rafter Seven that is running me out," Haines said raggedly. "Hogging the whole hill country. Raiding my cattle, burning my hay, his riders flinging rifle shots at my house at night and him knowing that Emily is expecting."

The bitterness of the man cut into Dalles like a whip slash. This picture Haines was painting was nothing new. He'd seen it many times before—pressure being applied to crumple nerves and ruin the hopes of lesser men. It was a part of rangeland expansion. But never before had its ruthless efficiency been so effectively brought home to him. Never before had he been so close to the receiving end.

There was little he could say. "Maybe—" he began.

Haines shook his head. "I've got to get some grub to the womenfolks. We been hiding in that hotel since yesterday noon—nothing to eat, afraid to stick our noses out the door. If Lambert learns where we are, we're finished."

"But why, Jas? If you're giving it up and running, what more does he want?"

"Lambert wants everything! The whole works, damn him! He wants legal deed and title to my place. He can't get it from me so he wants me dead. Then he'll keep after Emily until she sells out in just the way he wants it." Haines' eyes watered and he squinted to try and conceal the emotion that was choking him. "If—if it's a boy, I want him to have something to start with. That little spread is all I've got to give him. We—we've got to get clear so's he can have his chance."

THE hurt flayed Dalles. But worse was the hopelessness. Jasper Haines. His friend of long ago.

"You go back to your women, Jas," Dalles said. "I'll fetch you some grub."

Haines' head raised. "I thought you was Rafter Seven now?"

Dalles laughed, a strained sound that held no mirth. "Tomorrow, maybe, or the day after. But so far I'm still running loose. I reckon I can fetch you a little grub without making it a killing offense."

"You don't know Lambert!"

"Maybe he don't know me." Dalles turned Haines and gave him a gentle shove. "You go round-side in that hotel. I'll fetch what you need."

Haines turned and hurried back toward the two-story clapboard hotel. Dalles watched with a growing scowl. Then he flicked a quick, uneasy glance along the street. If John Lambert was the power common talk rated him, he would have friends in town. They would have seen him talking with Haines. Maybe already word had been sent to the Rafter 7 that Jasper Haines and his women were in town.

Dalles cursed softly and rubbed the heel of his palm along the butt of his Remington. He'd ridden to Meadville to join Lambert, not to antagonize him. Jasper Haines was already whipped, wanted only to ride out. Siding him now would only be throwing himself away. And yet, there had been times when Haines had sided *him.!*

"Hey!" Herrick called from the saloon doorway. "If you're wanting that drink, get a move on."

Dalles shook his head. Herrick hesitated, then crossed the walk and angled through the street dust to join him.

"John Lambert is on him with both feet," Dalles explained tersely. "Wants his hide nailed to the corral fence for keeps. We shared soogans once, Jas. Haines and me. I kinda thought—"

"Lambert!" Herrick shook his head. "You're bucking a pretty pat hand."

"I ain't figuring to buck Lambert. It's just that Jas Haines did me more favors than a man can forget. I—"

Herrick's hand stopped him, and Dalles turned to see a group of horsemen string out of the manzanita thickets below the foothills. Dust began lifting low webby feathers as they came spurring toward town.

"Lambert," Red Herrick said. "Sure as hell, that'll be Lambert and his bunch."

Dalles twisted away. A small shack with a cracked front window that was lettered "CAFE" in red barn paint caught his eye. Jas Haines was hungry; Jas Haines had his women with him!

Dalles turned for a brief glance at the horsemen. There had been another hungry boy once, he remembered; a boy named Dalles.

Leaving Herrick to stand with a scowl darkening his face, he began trotting toward the shack with the lettered window.

"Grub, and a lot of it," he told the counterman. "Pie, coffee, sandwiches. Fix it so's I can take it out."

The skinny, goose-necked counterman stared. "If it's for . . . If you aim on taking it over to the hotel, I ain't fixing it."

"It's for cash!" Dalles snapped. "And where I'm taking it is none of your damned business! Now, hop! Or you want to argue the point, mister?"

The counterman stared at Dalles' face for half a moment, then wilted. "I'll get it! I'll get it!" He began scurrying, trying to watch Dalles and see what he was doing at the same time.

Dalles crossed to the window and peered out. He turned back. The counterman shoved a towel-wrapped bundle forward with trembling hands.

"Coffee, too, friend," Dalles said.

"How'll you carry it?"

"I'll just take the pot. You can get it later."

The café man's jaw dropped. He made a vague gesture toward the back room where a stove was located. Dalles stepped through the doorway, picked up a steaming coffee pot, and crossed back toward the street door. Behind him the café man stood watching in uneasy silence.

"Add up the bill," Dalles called. "I figure to be back."

DALLES stepped outside. Herrick was no longer in the street. but had crossed back to stand beside their two horses in front of the saloon. The horsemen were much nearer town, surprisingly nearer; and Dalles saw that they were riding hard as though eager to arrive.

He eyed them, trying to determine how much time he would have. Trying to decide what to do with the time when he got it. But he had the answer to neither question when he faced around and began jog-trotting toward the hotel.

There was no clerk on duty. Dalles crossed the dusty lobby and stopped at the foot of the stairway. He called out. Sound came from above and he looked up to see Jasper Haines staring down at him. Something changed in Haines' face at sight of the coffee pot and food bundle, some doubt fading away to leave his countenance more friendly.

"Up here, Bob," Haines called. "They're hungry. Warn't for them I'd never stepped outside. Not till train time, I wouldn't."

Haines grasped Dalles by the arm and led him along the dim dust-smelling hallway. They stopped at the last door, where Haines rapped a signal with one knuckle. After an interval, the door opened.

Whatever Bob Dalles might have been expecting, it wasn't the tall, smoky-eyed girl who blocked their way. Haines said, "He got it, Marcia. Reckon Dalles—"

The woman cut him off with a shake of her head. "Lambert is coming, Jas! I saw him from the window! I got your Winchester."

"No, Marcia!" Haines cried. "Remember Emily's condition. We can't risk fighting."

"That's right," Dalles cut in. He wanted to assert himself, wanted this girl—this young woman to recognize him as a power and a force to be considered. Impressing her seemed to matter for some strange reason that he didn't try to fathom. He said, "You folks stay inside. I'll try and reason with John Lambert for you."

The smoky eyes turned full upon him then—as they would on a snake, or some repulsive crawling thing which had got underfoot.

"A gunman," she whispered. "Not man enough to work for a living. Just man enough to sell your gun skill. Bully weaker people, burn them out, shoot from ambush or with a dozen other gunmen backing you. Worse than a murderer!"

"Marcia!" Haines protested. "That's not fair."

She ignored him. "I'm keeping my Winchester on your back, bucko," she told Dalles. "The first move you make to doublecross Jasper will be your last."

A woman's querulous voice came from deeper within the room. The smoky-eyed girl turned to reply. Haines chose this moment to grasp Dalles by the arm and voice his confidence in him.

"Maybe she's right, Jas," Dalles said. "Anyway, she's cheeky. A woman with her spunk is worth a lot."

She spun in the doorway as though he had slapped her. Haines grinned, and color flooded into her face. Dalles started to add a ribald comment, then thought better of it. He touched his hat brim gravely, nodded, and turned away. Haines called after him, but he did not slow.

He was slouched against the hotel wall, a halfsmoked brown cigarette dead in his lips, when Lambert's crew came fogging into town. For the first time, Dalles saw people appear momentarily in doorways along the street. Willing and anxious to witness the execution, he figured drily.

For a brief moment his glance swerved toward Red Herrick standing in shade of the saloon awning down the block. This wasn't Herrick's deal; he couldn't ask the man to share it. Then Lambert's crowd drew his full attention.

Seven men, Dalles counted, led by a tall, raw-boned man whose lank jaws bristled with two weeks' growth of reddish whiskers. They came up the street to rein in directly before the hotel. None dismounted. Dalles pulled away from the wall to face them.

"Go have a drink on me, mister," the red-whiskered man called. "The Acme Saloon down the street. Just tell Ed that John Lambert sent you."

"Thanks," Dalles said. "But I do my own buying."

HE DID not move and, watching Lambert, Dalles saw the sudden spurt of wariness that touched the man's eyes. Lambert knew, then, that he was figuring in this thing some way.

"You happen to know a man by name of Jasper Haines?" Lambert asked softly.

Dalles nodded. He tried to keep the pack under surveillance without betraying too keen an interest in them. Usually at a time like this they waited for the boss to give them their cue. But a man could never be certain. A bloodthirsty gunny might break it at any moment. Or some greeny not yet hardened to the pressures and excitements of working as killer-for-hire might lose restraint and force the play.

John Lambert was more studied. He turned to stare along the street, picked up Red Herrick standing in front of the Acme Saloon, then looked farther along in search of other strangers. Finding none, he swiveled his glance back to Herrick.

"Jasper Haines is an old friend of mine," Dalles cut in quietly. "All he wants is a chance to get his wife and sister-in-law out of town. There's a train this afternoon."

Lambert laughed. "I'm for it. I've got nothing against Haines personally. I just want to buy him out."

"He won't sell." Dalles waved his hand

depreciatingly as though disclaiming faith in Haines' stand. "He has some notion of leaving a stake for his son. But, with him gone from here, what's to stop you from grazing?"

"I want the land! Legal deed and title!" Anger pushed a dark flush across Lambert's face. "You think I can't get all the graze—"

One of the horsemen crowded forward, stopping him. The man murmured something Dalles couldn't catch. Lambert turned, and Dalles saw Red Herrick walking toward them, slowly, his hand held half lifted in front of him, the palms forward.

"Your man?" Lambert said.

Dalles did not answer.

Herrick angled wide to come in from the side, experienced enough to keep out of a possible line of fire.

"Jim Knowles sent us from Bloomington, both of us," Herrick said loudly. "We figured on signing up with the Rafter Seven."

Lambert's face showed his surprise. He flicked a glance toward Dalles, then looked back at Red Herrick. "But now you're backing away?"

"No. I made the ride. I'm ready to sign up." Sweat beaded Herrick's swarthy dark forehead and trickled down one sharp cheek-bone. "Only not against Dalles. We been pards too long."

"You backing him in this?"

Herrick shook his head. Lambert settled back in the saddle and chuckled.

"Haines!" he yelled. "Come out and talk this over!"

"There's nothing to talk, Lambert." The voice came from just within the doorway, and Dalles realized that Jasper Haines had been witness to it all.

He did not turn. Haines' boot heels rapped the veranda, angling closer to stop close beside him.

"You can sell, Haines, and ride out free and easy," John Lambert said. "Or you can argue. But the excitement won't be good for your missus. If the boys should decide to shoot up the town, this old hotel won't stop any wild lead that might be flying. A man should consider that."

Haines' breath rasped loud in the quiet that followed Lambert's half-veiled threat.

"Then a man should consider," Lambert said. "Who's going to be looking after his missus? She's a right pretty lady. My men been noticing that and kinda speculating."

Dalles spun on his heel. He had caught the instinctive jerk of Jasper Haines' shoulder, had sensed the rage that drove the man into drawing. And making a play for his gun was just what John Lambert had been trying to goad Haines into trying.

Without giving time for thought, Dalles smashed his fist into Haines' face. Haines' head rocked back. For a bare instant he looked surprised, then the expression faded, and he went down. His half-drawn gun clattered away from his lax fingers.

Lambert had drawn. He sat now, staring, with a cocked six-gun in his fingers.

"You kill a man when he is down and unconscious?" Dalles called. "Is that the kind of fighting you do, Lambert?"

THE rancher hesitated. Temper boiled in his eyes so that Dalles could see it. Lambert wanted to shoot. God, how he wanted to! But not even a rough, tough hired gunman would stomach that kind of killing, and Lambert knew it. He let the hammer down on his belt gun.

"You damned meddler!" he cursed. "Climb your bronc and peel out of here! You'll never work for me! I ought to gut-shoot you for butting in!"

Dalles started a defiant grin. But something of the smoking hell in Lambert's face stopped him. He shook his head.

"Killing me wouldn't gain you much," he pointed out.

Lambert glared. His lips pressed against his teeth and quivered as the man fought to control his wrath. He reined away suddenly and rode toward the Acme Saloon. One by one his crew peeled away to follow. Even Herrick walked slowly in their van.

Dalles stood watching until the last of them had stepped inside the saloon. Then

quickly he scooped Haines' limp form up in his arms and carried him inside the hotel.

Haines' sister-in-law, the girl called Marcia, was halfway up the stairs.

"You—you traitorous coward!" she cried. "I saw it! Jasper trusting you and coming out to side you! And then you—"

The contempt struck sparks from Dalles' strained nerves. "He's alive, ain't he? How long you think he'd of lasted once John Lambert started shooting at him?"

Some of the loathing drained from Marcia's smoky blue eyes as she considered this new tangent of reasoning. She started to speak. Dalles cut her off.

"Those men with him ain't school kids playing jack straws," he snapped. "One shot and every one of them would have been pitching lead at Haines. Now, keep him inside. And stay away from the windows. All of you. Maybe, with luck, you'll stay alive to catch that train this afternoon."

Marcia nodded. Dalles let Haines' body slide to the lobby floor. "You can bring him to," he said. "I haven't got time to do it." He turned away with a vision of how soft Marcia's confusion was making her face.

On the hotel veranda he stopped, and stood pondering the strange morass of events which had sucked away his solid footing. She had called him a hired gunman, a killer, and her tone had made it the lowest, vilest epithet. Was it because she associated him with the victors, he wondered? If he had drawn, and fought, and died with Jasper Haines, would he have been a nobler man? Or was there a stigma attached to being a gunman of which he knew nothing? Strangely, and for the first time, the thought troubled him.

A man fights, he reflected morosely, whether for money or for something else. He fights, whether for himself or for somebody else. Red Herrick wanted to hang up his guns and quit fighting; only there was no quitting. Jasper Haines had shown that. It was merely a shifting of

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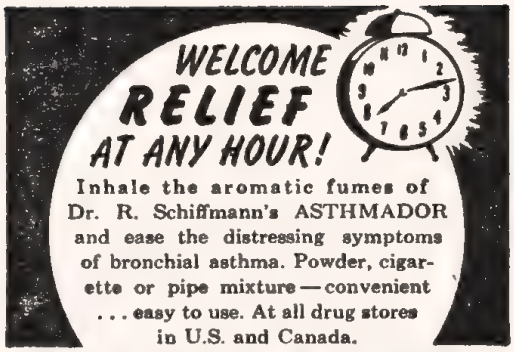
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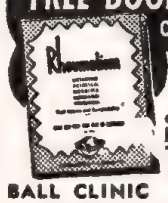

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scenes, a changing of weapons, new rules and pressures, and forces. But it was always fight or die.

Dalles rolled a quirly and smoked it down, not tasting the tobacco. He rolled another and crossed the veranda to stand in the hotel doorway. Quick steps echoed from the upper hall. Both Marcia and Jas Haines were gone from the lobby now. Dalles grinned wryly when he thought of what Haines must have felt. Then the grin was gone.

The sound of a train whistle jerked him alert. He stared at the saloon, but there was no activity to betray awareness of the train's heralded arrival. Or maybe Lambert was letting it drop!

Wheeling inside, Dalles went up the stairs and along the hall, rapped once at Haines' door, and thrust it open.

"Hurry now," he said. "We'll try to make it!"

Marcia was at the window staring toward the depot. Something in her attitude warned Dalles. He crossed the room to stand beside her.

John Lambert was at the depot. While Dalles watched, Lambert lifted the red signal panel from its holder and tossed it aside. Dalles swore softly. Without that signal panel to stop the train it would keep right on going, watching only for a signal to indicate the presence of passengers or freight.

The depot agent hurried out, said something to Lambert, and started toward that signal panel. Then he stopped, stared for a long time at Lambert, and turned back inside the faded yellow depot.

"Jasper!" a woman's voice called urgently. "Do hurry, or we'll miss the train!"

"No hurry," Dalles said slowly. "This isn't your day to train ride."

HAINES' shoulders slumped. He turned a dejected, hopeless face toward Dalles, said, "It was a try anyhow," and slumped down on the edge of the bed.

Dalles tried to cheer him. "There's always the next one. In the meantime—"

"In the meantime you'll figure out something else, you and—and Lambert!" Marcia was white-lipped as she tongue-lashed Dalles. "Build up our hopes, only to smash us down again! Keep us locked up here like rabbits in a box until finally we give up and sell!"

The hot angry shine of her eyes cut deep into Dalles. The quivering soft lips reaching inner fibres of him he'd never before suspected he possessed. He turned toward the door without answering, and she followed at his heels, heated with emotion, fumbling for more words with which to scourge him.

"Tell him it won't work!" she cried. "Tell him he can shoot until his guns melt, but we aren't giving in!"

He spun then, and grasped her arms. Violence had been his life, his code of conduct, his way of meeting problems and copying with exingencies. He was a fighting man and now, suddenly, the deep channel of past experience shaped a course of conduct for him.

Ignoring the staring Haines, Dalles drew the struggling girl to him and pressed his lips against hers. For a moment sheer surprise held her almost compliant, then she was fighting like a wildcat. Dalles shoved her away.

"You've had that coming," he said. "And I figure to earn it. Like you said, gunfighters got you into this mess. Maybe it will take a gunfighter to get you out."

He turned away, hitting the floor with his heels, feeling a lightness and sureness that was almost intoxication. Downstairs he paused long enough to fit his cartridge belt more comfortably around him. He changed the cant of his sombrero, feeling a cool riffling of nerves that was building his pitch and keying him up.

He would probably never see her again. He knew that, but somehow the prospect did not trouble him. He had known her lips for a few moments. Even that small bit had been more than life had formerly alotted him. What Jas Haines had known he, Dalles, had tasted.

He stepped into the street dust and felt

its heat work through the leather of his boots. He strode calmly, unruffled by thought of what lay ahead. The day was bright. Hills lifted dark and clear against the crystaline skyline. He raised his foot to come up onto the plank walk that fronted the Acme Saloon. If he had timed it right, Lambert would have had time to return.

He had. Dalles saw John Lambert and three men at the near end of the bar. Four men were grouped about a card game farther back. And clear back, standing alone, was Red Herrick. Herrick alone seemed not to be surprised at seeing Dalles step inside.

John Lambert scowled and hitched himself away from the bar. "Mister, you've got a nerve coming in here!"

Dalles laughed, shoving assurance against John Lambert, testing his nerve and his will to fight.

"Like I told you," Dalles said, "Jas Haines is my friend. He ain't asking much —just to be let alone until he can get his family out of town. I figure it's his due."

"His due is more'n that. He had his chance to sell. He wouldn't take it."

"And now you won't buy at any price," Dalles cut in softly. "Because in just half a minute I'm going to plug you through the belly. Nobody else is interested in seeing Jas Haines killed, so I reckon with you gone, he'll have a peaceful time."

Lambert stood as if stunned. The saloon grew clotted with a quiet that made it hard for a man to breathe.

Farther down the bar, Red Herrick shifted his position. He drawled, "I ain't signed yet, Bob. Don't figure me in."

"So that's it!" Lambert's yell broke the spell, ripped the quiet and the tension, and sent every man into abrupt motion.

Dalles lifted his sixgun and whirled himself away from the doorway even as the heavy weapon jacked into his fingers. Lambert had drawn and was turning to find him. Dalles fired, twisted to snap a hurried shot at the card players, then drove a shot into a squat, beaver-faced

[*Turn page*]

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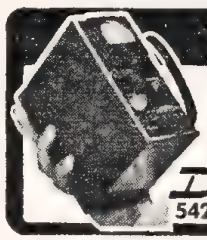

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man who was trying to see around Lambert.

The corner of the bar loomed up and Dalles dived into its lee. The beaver-faced man was down. Lambert had stumbled, but somehow held to his feet. Dalles tried for him again, and missed. A third Rafter 7 man leaped into the open to try a reckless snap-shot. Dalles smashed his mouth into bloody welter with a heavy slug, and rolled back against the wall.

BUT not all the audacity and gun skill, or crazy blind luck in the world could keep him going. And he knew it. For the moment sheer surprise was holding the Rafter 7 bunch uneven, but soon they'd settle down and he'd be wiped out by odds that he couldn't surmount.

"I'm not—" Red Herrick yelled above the gun racket. The sound broke in his throat and became a gurgle as Rafter 7 lead burned through his lungs.

Dalles chose that moment to leap up and throw himself across the bar. Lead packed at him, but he came down all in one piece, squatting limber-legged behind the long wooden counter.

"Don't let him get away!"

Lambert loomed through the smoke haze, hunched, one hand gripping a bloody patch where a bullet had eaten into his belly just above his pants button.

Dalles saw him, awed by the spectacle of a man dying on his feet and still trying to keep fighting. Lambert had to lean over the bar to locate Dalles. He leaned hard, using the structure to support his sagging weight. When he saw Dalles he tried to yell, tried to lift a gun and bring it into line.

Dalles fired once. Lambert jerked away as though snapped by a gigantic force he couldn't withstand.

Sound drained out of the saloon. Dalles inched along behind the bar, poking fresh loads into his gun. He canted his head to listen. A man was breathing noisily just beyond the boards of the bar. Maybe Herrick, but he doubted that Herrick still lived. Somewhere to the left a man shifted his weight. Floor boards creaked, and the noise instantly stopped.

"It could be over, boys," Dalles called softly. "Your boss is down. He won't be paying any of you for the rest of this fracas. You got nothing to gain by seeing Jasper Haines killed. Or me, either, for that matter. So if you want to crawl off, go ahead."

"We ain't crawling, mister!"

"My mistake, friend," Dalles said. "Let's put it this way. I'm squatting here waiting for the first hombre that sticks his head over the counter. If you want to try, just for the hell of it, go ahead. But if you want to ride out of town . . . Hell, man this fight has petered out."

For another long moment there was silence. Somewhere a man coughed, half-strangling as he tried to smother the sound.

"Reckon we'll amble, mister," one of the Rafter 7 men said. "Fighting now don't seem to be worth the chips. Give Missus Haines our regards."

Dalles grinned, sensing the shifting of a tide. Haines wouldn't be leaving now.

The Rafter 7 bunch began striding out, and Dalles waited, his Remington cocked and ready. But there was no treachery. Slowly he relaxed. Maybe, he thought, after he'd talked with Haines he would have time to show that sister-in-law of Jasper, that a gunman wasn't all killer.

Maybe . . . He wondered how he'd like Jas Haines as a brother-in-law, and grinned at the notion. Then he got to his feet.

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THE FRONTIER POST

(Continued from page 6)

obstacle to a badman's career. In a short time they returned tugging on lines that were attached to the howitzer. A wagon was brought along, loaded with ammunition.

"Pull her up here," shouted the ex-artilleryman who had selected a firing position behind some logs, just a few yards from the cabin. The gun battle continued while Pegleg adjusted the sights and fussed with the timing apparatus.

"Step back boys," commanded Pegleg. "Here she goes!"

There was a deafening roar and a great bellow of black smoke poured from the small cannon as the shot missed Killer Joe's fortress and crashed into the forest, splintering trunks and limbs, and causing a howl to rise from the amused townspeople who were still watching the grim spectacle.

"Better get a Johnny Reb to show you Yanks how to fire one of them guns," roared one of the town humorists.

Badman's Boots

Again the piece was loaded and Pegleg made an adjustment in his aim based on his previous margin of error. Then he fired again, and this time the ear-splitting explosion was followed by a shattering and splintering of the log cabin as the shot tore into the chimney. Now the vigilantes and townspeople let bellow of black smoke poured rom the small

Again the cannon was fired, and again, until the cabin was a heap of smouldering rubble and it was impossible that anything inside could be alive. When the vigilantes moved in on the ruins, only the boots of the dead Killer Joe Pizanthia could be seen protruding through a pile of shattered timbers.

It was the end for Killer Joe, and probably the only time in history that an artillery piece was used to subdue a lone outlaw.

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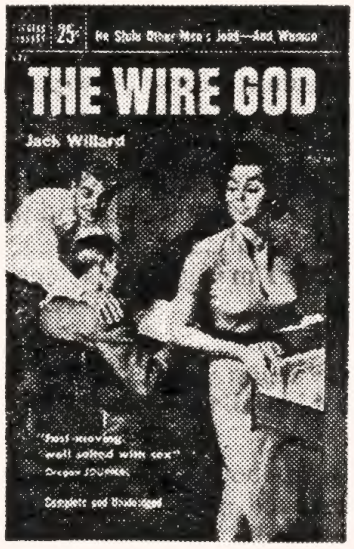

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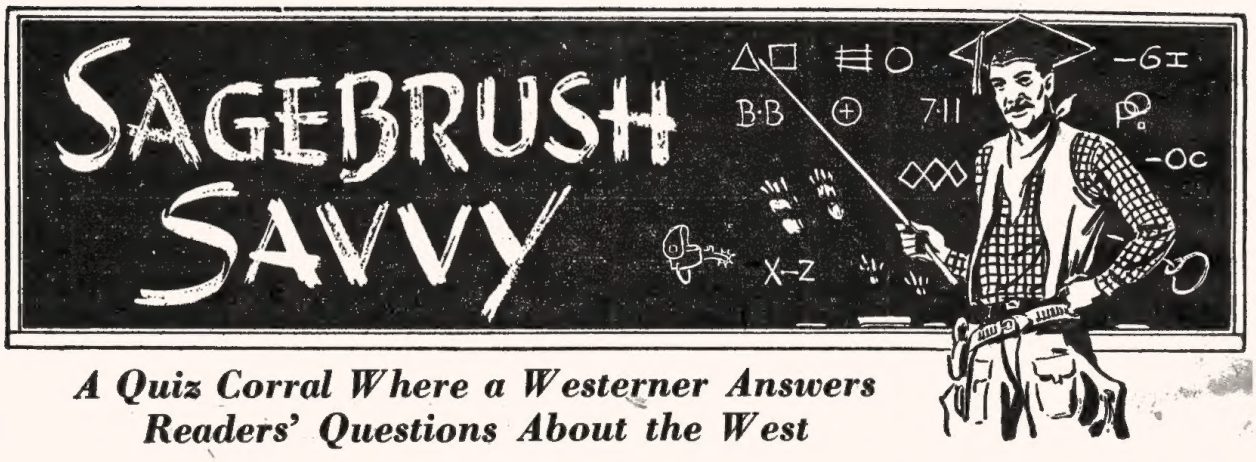

A Quiz Corral Where a Westerner Answers Readers' Questions About the West

Q.—1. I know McClellan saddles are sold cheap. Are they worth the money? 2. Is a three quarter rig saddle any good? 3. How much should a well trained saddle horse (for pleasure riding only), breeding unknown, age eight years, sell for?—S.G. (Mass.).

A.—1. For cow ranch work a hornless McClellan saddle is useless at any price, but Cavalrymen used to ride them, so I suppose others can do so, though personally I consider them very uncomfortable. A.—2. Three quarter rig saddles are O.K., but not advisable for heavy roping without a rear cinch also. In any case a broad cinch is advisable with a three quarter rig. A.—3. Impossible to answer this one accurately, since horse prices vary all over the U.S. I would judge that most places in the west such a horse would be worth from $50 to $100. This reader also asks me what I know about the Green Mountain Horse Association and the 100 mile trail ride they sponsor every fall. The honest answer to that is: Nothing. Vermont is too far out of my territory. But I do know that numerous such riding clubs have some wonderful times on their annual trail rides, and I'm sure this one is no exception.

Q.—Is "the Visalia saddle" a certain make or just a type of saddle?—G. KF. (Ohio).

A.—In a way, both. A certain type of saddle-tree designed many years ago by the Visalia Stock Saddle Company is also used by other saddle-makers and called "the Visalia tree". I trust it will not violate the no-advertising rule, however, to say that "the Visalia saddle" applies also to any saddle made by that company, which started making saddles at Visalia, California in 1870 and has recently moved to Sacramento.

Q.—At what age are the calves on a western cow ranch usually weaned?—Burt W. (Ind.).

A.—Usually six to seven months. The big Bell Ranch in New Mexico, for instance, weans at an average age of 205 days.

Q.—What is the difference between a running iron and a stamp iron?—P.P.W. (Md.).

A.—A running iron is a rod-like branding iron with a curved or rounded end, with which the brander literally "writes" the brand on a critter's hide. Oldtimers, especially rustlers, often used a cinch ring held with tongs or a pair of sticks the same way. A stamp iron is a branding iron shaped to stamp or print the brand design all in one application.

Q.—Are there any modern cowboy artists as good as Charlie Russell was?—Art Lover (Mich.).

A.—That might be a matter of opinion. Certainly no cowboy artist that I know about considers himself Russell's equal in painting the old west. But of course Russell was *there* and saw it all with his own eyes. Some of the best modern cowboy artists, in my opinion, are Harold D. Bugbee, Randy Steffens, George Phippen, Lorenz, John Mariani, Joe De Yong, Ross Santee, and as authentic cowboy cartoonists, J. R. Williams (of Out Our Way) and Ace Reid (of Zeb and Jake), are plumb impossible to beat.

—S. Omar Barker

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—Continued from Back Cover

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